

Exploring Gifted Adults' Perception of Giftedness in their Pursuit of Graduate Education

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores 8 gifted adults' perceptions of their own giftedness and how those perceptions influenced their pursuit of graduate education as revealed by retrospective interviews. This study serves to inform the existing literature surrounding giftedness especially as it relates to gifted individuals across the lifespan and their experiences and perceptions of education at all levels. This study also provides insight into the emotional impact being labeled gifted has on an individual's self-concept and academic identity. The major themes that emerged using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) were discussed under five main headings: Evolution of Giftedness, Success and Failure, Expectations, Effort, and Doubt and Proof. An adaptation of the listening guide method (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) was used to provide a unique and personal perspective of the phenomenon of giftedness and revealed the feelings behind the themes that emerged in the interpretive phenomenological analysis method. Specifically, this study illuminates the lack of evolution that an individual's understanding and perception of giftedness undergoes across the lifespan, and the impact such a static and school-bound understanding has on gifted adults' self-concept. It also reveals the influence that gifted individuals' innate need to achieve has on their academic aspirations and their perceptions of themselves as gifted. Furthermore, it reveals how important the understanding and internalization of failure can be on the self-concept of gifted individuals, and that this issue needs immediate attention at all levels of education.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study explores gifted adults' perceptions of their own giftedness and how those perceptions influenced their pursuit of graduate education. More specifically, it investigates the perceptions of giftedness of 8 adults as revealed by retrospective interviews. This qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand the intellectual, social, and emotional dynamics of giftedness and the role it plays in academic pursuit. The themes that emerged from the data analysis contribute to a growing understanding and knowledge of gifted individuals across the lifespan and of the need for strategies to support gifted individuals and their pursuit of academics.

### Background

Much of today's understanding of giftedness is founded on the work of Lewis Terman (1925) who focused on superior intelligence as the key indicator of giftedness. Terman perpetuated the idea that intelligence was a finite commodity that was bestowed at birth and was constant over time and tests. In recent years, as our perspectives on intelligence changed and became more expansive, so did our views of giftedness expand. Sternberg's theory of successful intelligence, Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness, and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, have allowed us to view intelligence and giftedness in new ways, and have opened the door to looking at giftedness as more than just intelligence (Tannenbaum, 2003). Research on the characteristics of gifted individuals began to emerge, and showed that these characteristics covered more than just intellectual abilities, but spanned creative, social, and emotional dimensions as well (Lovecky, 1986; Silverman, 1993; Whitmore, 1980). What became even more apparent was the heightened sensitivity or intensity gifted

individuals exhibited as they experienced life (Gross, 1998; Mendaglio, 2008; Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright, & Jackson, 2007; Piechowski, 2006; Pyryt, 2008; Silverman, 2008; Tolan, 1994). This insight led to research surrounding self-perceptions of gifted individuals (see Gross; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone et al.) and brought to light many factors that influence the development of a gifted identity.

Not only do gifted students have to deal with the ordinary rigors of school, but at the same time they also have to incorporate their innate differences that result from being gifted into who they are and how they interact in everyday life. Being gifted can influence how success and failure is interpreted and internalized (Assouline, Colangelo, Ihrig, & Forstadt, 2006; McNabb, 2003; Nokelainen, Tirri, & Merenti-Välimäki, 2007); how individuals react when subjected to intense academic competition, peer envy, and bullying (Massé & Franfoys, 2002; Peterson & Ray, 2006a; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Rizza & Reis, 2001); and how perfectionist or underachieving tendencies can manifest (McHugh, 2006; Peterson, 2001; Reis & Renzulli). Society alters its expectations of giftedness when an individual shifts from childhood to adulthood, and the focus moves from academic success to life and career success (Gross, 1998; Tolan, 1994).

#### Statement of the Problem

As gifted children grow up, the label of giftedness tends to fade away. This does not change the characteristics of giftedness in an individual, though it may change an individual's perception of their own giftedness. The aim of gifted education is to identify and support the development of gifted individuals. Gifted students are expected and encouraged to explore their potential and this can be actualized through the pursuit of

graduate education. Why then do individuals endowed with so much academic potential shy away from the upper echelons of academia (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988)?

Many studies of gifted individuals emphasize the unique attributes that characterize giftedness and the intensity that gifted individuals bring to their interaction with people and the events in their lives (Gross, 1998; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone et al., 2007; Tolan, 1994). Gifted individuals' self-perceptions of these characteristics and intensities influence how they will address their innate need to achieve (Gross).

There are relatively few studies that focus on gifted adults and their self-perceptions of giftedness (Gross, 1998; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone et al., 2007; Tolan, 1994). Of the studies that exist, most focus on individuals' perceptions of giftedness as related to career and life success. Relatively little is known about how self-perceptions of giftedness impact later academic success. The question that emerges is: How do the self-perceptions of these gifted individuals change over time, and how do these perceptions impact adult learners and their pursuit of graduate education?

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the self-perceptions of eight gifted adults regarding their own giftedness, how their giftedness changed over time, and how those perceptions influenced their pursuit of graduate education.

The specific research questions are:

1. How have individuals' self-perceptions and understanding of giftedness changed over time?
2. How has being identified gifted influenced an individual's perceptions of education?

3. How do those perceptions influence their pursuit of graduate education?
4. How do gifted individuals perceive the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness?

### Rationale

Why do some gifted individuals pursue the academic potential identified in childhood and some do not? Having been identified as gifted when I was a child, I can relate to the struggles gifted adults undergo as they transition from childhood to adulthood, where the concept of giftedness, once defined almost solely by academic achievement, loses its concreteness and becomes more abstract (Jacobsen, 1999; Tolan, 1994). During this transition from adolescence to adulthood, I struggled to find a path to explore my potential and often doubted that I was still gifted.

This study is personally significant and important to me, as well as to the gifted population and the broader educational community. Even though formal work on my thesis only began a year ago, the seeds of this research were planted years ago when I was first identified as gifted. I quickly recognized the power that such a label carried and the impact being labeled had. The gifted label may be seen as having a positive connotation, but its impact is not necessarily positive and can have far reaching effects on those children who bear the burden of such a label. Educators focus on the intellectual abilities of the gifted, but often fail to acknowledge the complex social and emotional needs that are part of being gifted (Pyryt, 2008). Over the years I began to understand how different I was, how taboo it was for me to talk about being gifted, and its influence on who I was and how I perceived life. My pursuit of academics and my continuing journey to explore how the social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of giftedness

have impacted the lives of gifted individuals has not only led me to undertake this study, but also led me to a place of peace and understanding, where I can finally accept the intricacies of who I am and know that I am not alone in this heightened understanding of experience.

This study is also significant because it contributes to the growing body of research on gifted adults and their self-perceptions (Gross, 1998; Jacobsen, 1999; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Loveky, 1986; Perrone et al., 2007; Peterson, 2001; Terman & Oden, 1947, 1959; Tolan, 1994), and it begins to fill a significant gap in the literature concerning the academic lives of gifted adults. The insights obtained provide those involved in the education of gifted individuals, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents, with information that can help create strategies to support the ongoing academic pursuits of gifted students. As this study focuses primarily on graduate studies, the results may be of particular relevance to university administrators, professors, academic advisors, and other postsecondary service providers. The voices of these individuals may offer valuable insights and direction for the development of services, resources, and policies regarding the support and advancement of gifted individuals' educational pursuit.

This study may be valuable for the participants. The open and honest nature of this study provided participants with an opportunity to share through the interviews and journaling task their perspectives, perceptions, and the trials and triumphs of being gifted. It is hoped that through this process the participants gained a greater understanding of themselves as gifted individuals. This knowing will hopefully help them accept and celebrate the fact that they are gifted.

## Theoretical Framework

This study was designed with the goal of giving a voice to the struggles of gifted adults in their pursuit of academia by highlighting the characteristics and heightened sensitivities that influence the lives and perceptions of gifted adults. This study used Dabrowski's (1964) theory of positive disintegration (TPD) to provide a framework for discussing and conceptualizing psychological intensities that impact and influence the characteristics of giftedness as perceived by gifted individuals, which in turn would influence their pursuit of graduate education. Dabrowski's theory is a personality theory first and foremost, but a component of this theory, overexcitability, helps to illuminate and explain the enhanced manner of experiencing that is prevalent in gifted individuals (Mendaglio, 2008). Dabrowski understood that not all people were equal in their ability to experience overexcitability, and that gifted individuals commonly exhibited high levels of overexcitability in the intellectual, emotional, and imaginal realms (Mendaglio; Silverman, 2008). Pyryt (2008) advocates TPD as a practical and valuable tool for investigating the richness and depth of the gifted individual's experience.

The present study applies the theory of positive disintegration as a theoretical framework as it is the only theory that focuses on the emotional and psychological facets of giftedness in an attempt to understand how gifted individuals perceive the world around them. A goal of this theory, and of this study, is to explore the social, emotional, and psychological realms of giftedness – the personal side.

## Scope and Limitations of the Study

Guided by the theory of positive disintegration and its focus on heightened sensitivity or overexcitability, this study explores gifted adults' perceptions of giftedness

and its influence on their pursuit of graduate education. Although the benefits of using a model that focuses on the emotional and psychological dimensions of giftedness are promising, and a unique and unusual perspective on giftedness, some limitations with using this model and with this study in general need to be discussed. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) and Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) discuss some of the measurement problems inherent in the self-reporting nature of this type of study, specifically calling into question how dependable and objective the data are as the reliability of memory and individual perceptions of events are challenged.

By interviewing nongifted adults in various stages of graduate education, a more complete and contrasting picture of the perspectives and influences involved in pursuing graduate education may be obtained. In my research, I did not conduct interviews with nongifted individuals, but explored the memories and perceptions of gifted individuals, which provided valuable insight into how being gifted influences academic decisions and how these individuals see themselves in an academic light.

Additionally, this study was just one glimpse into the lives of gifted adults; a longitudinal study across the academic lifespan may have yielded richer data and a broader range of themes and perspectives. By collecting data at different transitional times in a student's academic life, a deeper understanding of why gifted students do or do not pursue graduate education would be obtained. Due to my time constraints, this was not possible, and instead, participants were asked to share stories and reflect upon their past life and academic experiences, from when they were first identified as gifted until the present.

Giftedness is a complex and dynamic concept, and like intelligence, falls along a

broad continuum, ranging from mildly gifted to highly gifted to genius (Piechowski, 2006; Terman, 1925). Giftedness is also manifested in a multitude of ways and in a variety of areas, from math to art and from sports to literature (Piechowski; Pyryt, 2008). The dimensions of degree and type of giftedness were not controlled for in this study, and neither was the issue of gender addressed. By not placing restrictions on participants regarding gender and degree and type of giftedness, I was able to select and obtain information from a diverse group of gifted individuals. Furthermore, the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the sample used in my research, except to those who match the participants in their frame of reference as upper-middle class Caucasians.

As a researcher attempting data collection, analysis, and interpretation for the first time, my inexperience may have an impact on the depth of the results. With more experience, I would have been able to bring better interviewing techniques to the study and perform a more thorough and comprehensive data analysis. My faculty advisor was incredibly helpful in offering guidance and insight into the research process, which balanced my inexperience. Other significant limitations include the level of comfort that could be achieved by both the researcher and the participants. I specifically selected participants with whom I had established relationships with in order to provide a greater degree of comfort in the hopes that it would allow for richer responses. I also hoped that my established relationships with the participants would help negate the impact that the presence of a voice recorder may have had on the comfort level of the participants.

#### Outline of the Remainder of the Document

This first chapter offered an introduction to the problem being addressed in this study by reviewing background information of the problem, the problem context, the



purpose of the study, the rationale, and the scope and limitations. The following four chapters include a review of the literature, a description of the study's methodologies and procedures, a discussion of the themes that emerged from the participants' interviews and journals, and an examination of the conclusions drawn from the findings and the implications for practice and further research.

More specifically, Chapter Two reviews the literature on giftedness and adult education. This survey includes definitions of giftedness and perspectives on intelligence, a summary of characteristics of giftedness and introduces a theoretical framework for giftedness. This review examines a multitude of factors that influence self-perceptions of giftedness, the creation of a gifted identity, and examines how expectations and perceptions of gifted individuals change as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Finally, this chapter reviews literature on adult learning and the pursuit of graduate education.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodologies and procedures used in this qualitative study. This includes a description of the research design, a review of participant and site selection procedures, participant demographics, and instrumentation. The data collection process is discussed and the two data analysis techniques are described, including the steps involved in the interpretive phenomenological method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003). This chapter also includes a discussion of methodological assumptions, processes used to establish credibility, and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents an overview and summary of the findings of this study. Themes that emerged from the interviews and journals of participants are addressed.

Chapter Four also presents the I poems and a brief analysis of the contrapuntal voices that were discovered using the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003).

Chapter Five amalgamates the prior four chapters by summarizing the findings, relating the findings to the existing literature and the study's guiding research questions, and outlining the implications of this study for theory, practice, and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews past research on giftedness and adult learning. The first section of this literature review presents a summary of definitions of giftedness and perspectives on intelligence. The second part of the literature survey reviews characteristics of giftedness and introduces a theoretical framework for giftedness. The third section of this literature review examines a multitude of factors that influence self-perceptions of giftedness and the creation of a gifted identity. The fourth section examines how expectations and perceptions of gifted individuals change as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The last section reviews literature on adult learning and the pursuit of graduate education. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature.

### Defining Giftedness

The concept of giftedness has changed over the last few decades as researchers examine different theories of intelligence. This section discusses the many perspectives on giftedness.

#### *Early Research on Giftedness*

A hundred years ago the concept of genius or giftedness implied an intellectually superior individual who was physically weak, often eccentric, and occasionally on the brink of madness (Whitmore, 1980). Terman's (1925) classic longitudinal study of gifted children, *Genetic Studies of Genius*, dispelled this myth and instead painted a picture of gifted children as superior in all aspects of growth and development: mental, physical, and emotional (Whitmore). Terman saw giftedness as intellectual superiority that was evidenced at an early age and believed that "gifted children represent high potentiality"

(p. 307). Terman defined intellectual superiority as an ability to attain high scores on intelligence tests and noted that along with intellectual superiority, common indicators of giftedness were intellectual curiosity, a wealth of miscellaneous information, and the desire to learn to read. Terman utilized IQ scores and scholastic achievement to initially identify gifted individuals, and his definition of giftedness included those individuals who evidenced their giftedness through exceptional accomplishments in all aspects of life (Whitmore). Terman saw the gifted child's high potentiality being expressed as great success in career and family life during adulthood.

Terman's (1925) research and approach to giftedness helped to equate high IQ to giftedness, and supported the idea that intelligence is tied to the skills and abilities valued in the school system (Károlyi, Ramos-Ford, & Gardner, 2003; Tannenbaum, 2003; Whitmore, 1980). As definitions of intelligence changed from a purely academic viewpoint to one which encompassed several different types of intelligence, so too did the definition of giftedness expand.

#### *Perspectives on Intelligence and Giftedness*

Superior intelligence has always been regarded as the key component of giftedness and definitions of giftedness reflect this idea. It is important to note, however, that how a scholar defines intelligence is reflected in his/her view of giftedness. Terman's (1925) foundational study of giftedness viewed intelligence in terms of a general intelligence factor – a finite and unchangeable level of intelligence that can be measured and found consistent across tests, abilities, and time. This view of intelligence limits the identification of gifted individuals to those who excel at the thinking skills that make one successful in a school setting (Tannenbaum, 2003).

Sternberg's (2003) theory of successful intelligence broadens the spectrum of giftedness and places intelligence into a sociocultural context; successful intelligence distinguishes between being smart at school and being smart at dealing with real life issues and complexities (Tannenbaum, 2003). Sternberg proposes three types of intellectual giftedness: analytical giftedness or "book smarts" which Sternberg equates with the type of intelligence measured by intelligence tests, synthetic giftedness which focuses on the creative and intuitive aspects of intelligence, and practical giftedness which highlights a person's ability to apply analytic and synthetic skills to everyday situations. Sternberg's theory recognizes the creative and "street smart" facets of giftedness, and he acknowledges the need for a blend of all three types of giftedness in order to achieve great success. Sternberg suggests that intelligence is not the whole story of giftedness – creativity, personality disposition, and motivational status all play important roles.

Renzulli (2002) explores the idea of clusters of personality traits that make up gifted behaviours in his 3-ring conception of giftedness. According to Renzulli (2002, 2003), gifted behaviour is comprised of three trait clusters (above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity) and their interaction with each other and the environment. Renzulli and Reis (1997, as cited in Renzulli, 2002) explain that "individuals capable of developing gifted behavior are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance" (p. 8). Renzulli (2002) suggests that no one cluster is more important than another, and that while general ability may be a static concept, specific abilities, task commitment, and creativity are contextually rooted. As a result of this conception of giftedness, Renzulli

(2002) contends that challenging situations are necessary for the development of task commitment and creativity as they relate to areas of personal interest.

An even wider view of intelligence acknowledges giftedness in areas outside of those normally tied to academic intelligence. Gardner's (1983, 1999) theory of multiple intelligences argues that there are eight intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic) and possibly more, that each one develops to some degree, that these intelligences often work in tandem, and that each individual displays different levels of development in each intelligence (Károlyi et al., 2003). Károlyi et al. note that each of the intelligences follows a different developmental trajectory for each individual and that exceptional development in one or more intelligence is characteristic of gifted individuals. This view of intelligence helps to explain giftedness in music, sports, and leadership – areas not ordinarily associated with intelligence and high IQ.

It is widely understood that great intelligence, no matter how you define it, characterizes giftedness in an individual (Whitmore, 1980). However, the term gifted means much more than just great intelligence; it implies the possession of a potential greater than the norm (Gagné, 2003; Piechowski, 2008; Renzulli, 2003; Silverman, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2003; Terman, 1925; Tolan, 1994; Whitmore), and characteristics, feelings, and experiences that are more intense than the average individual's (Gross, 1998; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone et al., 2007; Pyryt, 2008; Silverman, 2008; Tolan). It is the interplay between great intelligence, distinctive special aptitudes, personality traits, a supportive environment, and chance that some believe constitute giftedness (Renzulli, 2003; Silverman, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2003).

### Characterizing Giftedness

Gifted children are commonly identified by their high academic achievement, high IQ scores, or high scores on similar intelligence and gifted measures (Renzulli, 2002; Tolan, 1994). These children are recognized for their behaviours and characteristics that are substantially advanced compared to their chronological peers (Perrone et al., 2007; Tannenbaum, 1983; Whitmore, 1980). Along with these intellectual measures, there is a litany of non-intellective traits that characterize gifted individuals. Gifted individuals are not homogenous in their personality traits and, therefore, many individuals exhibit these characteristics in varying degrees and intensities. It is not expected that any individual will exhibit all traits nor is the presence of any particular trait indicative of giftedness. Many researchers have contributed to the list of traits, and these traits can be categorized into intellectual/academic abilities, creative abilities, and affective/socioemotional abilities. Table 1 presents a summary of these traits.

#### *Intellectual/Academic Abilities*

Gifted individuals are traditionally seen to be highly curious, inquisitive, and possess a wide range of interests (Perrone et al., 2007; Piechowski, 2006; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1983; Terman & Oden, 1947; Tolan, 1994). These individuals are also capable of absorbing an extraordinary quantity of information (Perrone et al.; Tannenbaum, 1983), processing and comprehending advanced subject matter (Renzulli, 2002; Tolan), and capable of quick mastery and recall of information (Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Terman & Oden, 1947; Whitmore, 1980). Gifted individuals are often recognized for their logical reasoning ability; they are seen as good thinkers (Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1993; Whitmore). A strong indicator of

Table 1

*Traits of Giftedness*

Intellectual/ Academic	Creative	Affective/ Socioemotional
Highly curious, inquisitive	Original, unique thinkers	Heightened self-awareness
Wide range of interests	Vivid imagination	Perfectionist/self-critical
Perseverant when interested	Keen sense of humour	Unusual emotional depth and intensity
Logical reasoning ability	Openness to new ideas and experiences	Motivated to self-actualize
Absorb large quantities of information	Willingness to take risks	Extreme sensitivity and compassion
Ability to process and comprehend advanced subject matter	Sensitivity to aesthetics	Heightened expectations of self and others
Quick mastery and recall of information		Advanced levels of moral judgment
High level of language development and verbal ability		Great concern with justice and fairness
Early and avid love of reading		
Long attention span		



giftedness is the demonstration of a high level of language development and verbal ability, which is often manifested in children as an early and avid love of reading (Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1993; Terman & Oden, 1947; Whitmore). It is also common for gifted individuals to be persevering in their efforts when interested and possessing of a long attention span (Perrone et al.; Piechowski, 2006; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1983).

### *Creative Abilities*

Creativity is slowly becoming synonymous with giftedness, and creative traits are common in many intellectually gifted individuals. Gifted individuals are acknowledged as original, creative, and innovative thinkers (Lovecky, 1986; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993), often with keen senses of humour (Silverman, 1993; Terman, 1925; Tolan, 1994) and vivid imaginations (Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1993; Terman & Oden, 1959). Piechowski (2006) states that creativity and imagination often manifest in gifted children as a “predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions” (p. 25), and are exhibited in the frequent use of fantasy play. Openness to new ideas and experiences, willingness to take risks, and sensitivity to aesthetics are also identified as creative indicators of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002).

### *Affective/Socioemotional Abilities*

Gifted individuals often have heightened expectations of self and others, which in turn bring out perfectionist and self-critical tendencies (Perrone et al., 2007; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Tolan, 1994; Whitmore, 1980). Unusual emotional depth and intensity, sensitivity, and compassion (Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Lovecky, 1986; Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1993; Whitmore) are common traits of gifted individuals,

as is a heightened self-awareness (Lewis & Kitano) and strong personal motivation to self-actualize (Tannenbaum, 1983) or “become all the self is capable of being” (Lovecky, p. 574). Gifted individuals also possess advanced levels of moral judgment and great concern with justice and fairness (Lewis & Kitano; Silverman, 1993; Terman, 1925).

While most characteristics of giftedness exhibit a positive influence on the individual, some characteristics can present themselves negatively; perfectionism, idealism, and self-criticism can be potentially problematic (McHugh, 2006; Perrone et al., 2007; Reis & Renzulli, 2004).

#### *Theoretical Frameworks and a Defining Characteristic for Giftedness*

When having a discussion regarding giftedness, one must also consider self and identity. Erikson’s (1959) theory of psychosocial development plays a prominent role in how we view personality and identity development. For Erikson, personality develops in a series of stages across the entire lifespan, which incorporate the impact of social interaction on identity. Erikson argues that the term identity “connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (p. 102), but that identity develops and solidifies as one ages. In particular, Erikson believes that identity is formed by selecting and assimilating the characteristics (or identities) from childhood into a new configuration, which is dependent on how society views that individual and their identities.

Dabrowski’s (1964) theory of positive disintegration (TPD) served as the main conceptual framework for the present study. TPD focuses on the concept of emotions as a driving force behind personality development. Dabrowski believes that in order for personal growth to occur, a series of psychological disintegrations and reintegrations

must be experienced, similar to Erikson's (1959) need for conflict as a turning point for development, resulting in a dramatic shift in an individual's conception of self and the world. These psychic disintegrations are initiated through intense emotional experiences and internal conflict, which aid individuals in the evaluation of their value systems and helps them move along the continuum of self-actualization (Mendaglio, 2008).

Dabrowski's theory maintains five levels of development, with the fifth level being the attainment of self-actualization. The transition from one level to another requires the disintegration of the current value system, which results from conflicts between the internal and external perceptions of an individual's reality brought to light by intense emotional experiences (overexcitabilities), and the reintegration of a new value system constructed to alleviate those conflicts (Mendaglio; Yakmaci-Guzel & Akarsu, 2006).

Dabrowski (1964) suggests that all individuals are born with an innate and defined capacity for personal growth. The developmental potential of an individual, a key component of TPD, is created when overexcitabilities are combined with intelligence, special abilities, and the capacity for internal reflection and metamorphosis (Silverman, 2008). This developmental potential is the "original endowment which determines what level of development a person may reach if the physical and environmental conditions are optimal" (Yakmaci-Guzel & Akarsu, 2006, p. 44). Silverman (2008) defines overexcitabilities, a term coined by Dabrowski (1964), as "an overabundance of energy or the capacity for exuberance and enhanced experience" (p. 158), and notes that overexcitabilities are not particular areas of talent, but are representative of the tendencies and ways of experiencing that an individual utilizes when interacting with reality.

Dabrowski, through clinical observation, noted that individuals tended to react to stimuli

in certain ways and he categorized these tendencies into five overexcitabilities: psychomotor, intellectual, emotional, imaginal, and sensual. Dabrowski acknowledged the presence of intellectual, emotional, and imaginal overexcitabilities in an individual as essential for advanced psychological development and, therefore, indicative of giftedness and creativity.

Many researchers believe that the gifted differ from the nongifted more in degree rather than in specific behaviours, and not just in academics or intellectual potential, but also in basic personality and social and emotional needs (see Gross, 1998; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2006, 2008; Pyryt, 2008; Silverman, 2008; Tolan, 1994; Whitmore, 1980). It is this disparity in social and emotional experience, which researchers often refer to as heightened sensitivities or intensities (Gross; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone et al., 2007; Tolan) or overexcitabilities (Dabrowski, 1964; Mendaglio; Piechowski, 2006, 2008; Pyryt; Silverman, 2008), which often set individuals apart and mark them as gifted.

Dabrowski's (1964) theory of positive disintegration has been groundbreaking in the field of gifted education, and is a unique perspective on the affective traits that characterize giftedness and a useful tool for examining the richness and depth of the gifted individual's experience (Pyryt, 2008).

#### Factors Influencing Self-perceptions of Giftedness

Being labeled as gifted can change a student's perception of how and why he/she is successful in and out of school. This section will discuss factors that can influence an individual's perceptions of giftedness and how it impacts his/her identity.

#### *Success and Failure*

It is widely acknowledged by educators that some learners are more motivated to put forth effort at school tasks than others, and that the degree of effort brought to a task by a learner varies across learning tasks. During the course of a learner's academic journey, learners go through widely different experiences and apply different reasoning to explain the success or failure they encounter (Boekaerts, Otten, & Voeten, 2003). One theory that helps to explain this is Weiner's (1972, 1985) attribution theory. Boekaerts et al. state that attribution theory:

Focuses on the meaning people attach to task situations in terms of causal attributions and assumes that once students have decided on the cause of an event, this knowledge will affect both their emotional reaction to success and failure, and their expectations regarding future outcomes. These in turn, influence appraisals of future task situations; academic self-concepts, and to a certain extent academic success. (p. 332)

Weiner's (1972, 1985) attribution theory identified four attributes that are commonly used by students to explain success and failure in school; these attributes are effort, ability, task difficulty, and luck. Weiner (1972, 1985) also dichotomizes these attributes along the internal-external dimension, the stable-unstable dimension, and the controllable-uncontrollable dimension. Ability and task difficulty are seen as stable attributes, while effort and luck are more variable (McNabb, 2003). Assouline et al. (2006) noted that ability, task difficulty, and luck are all uncontrollable attributes, and that the only attribution factor that a student had any control over was effort (see also Bogie & Buckhalt, 1987; McNabb). Early research found that ability attributions were often associated with success, but not with failure (Weiner, 1972). Effort attributions, on

the other hand, were associated with incidences of failure (Bogie & Buckhalt; Weiner, 1972). McNabb notes, “because effort is generally perceived to be under one’s control, it is changeable,” (p. 420) and this perception allow adaptive academic behaviours to influence future success and failure attributions. Further work on attribution theory has done much to increase our understanding of how self-perceptions can influence academic achievement, motivation, and behaviour in the classroom (Assouline et al.; McNabb).

Bogie and Buckhalt (1987) studied gifted, average, and educable mentally retarded (EMR) students between the ages of 10-12 and their persistence of effort following failure, success expectancies, and causal attributions. In this study, 64 students were asked to reproduce designs with nine reversible squares – success designs were easily solvable in the 3 minutes allotted, and failure designs were unsolvable because the required squares were not available to the participant (Bogie & Buckhalt). Before the first task was started, the participant was asked to predict how many of the tasks they would be able to solve. The participant was then asked to solve three success designs. After the tasks were completed, participants were asked to provide reasons why they succeeded, and were given the opportunity to rank the attributions from one to four (Bogie & Buckhalt). This process was then repeated, but the participants were given three failure designs to try to solve. After being asked why they thought they failed, the participants ranked the attributions a second time, and then the participants were asked to predict their success rate if three more tasks were given to them. The final question the investigator asked was if the participants would rather work on tasks they were likely to be successful at, or would they prefer to attempt more challenging tasks (Bogie & Buckhalt).

Data were analyzed using MANOVAs to determine that attribution factors yielded a significant main effect between groups ( $p < 0.05$ ), and then was further analyzed with ANOVAs to determine which attribute caused the effect. Bogie and Buckhalt (1987) found that task difficulty was a prominent determinant of success for the gifted students, and less so for the EMR students. All three groups attributed failure mainly to task difficulty, while EMR students indicated that lack of effort also contributed to their failure (Bogie & Buckhalt).

Bogie and Buckhalt (1987) found that these results ran contrary to their predictions. They had expected success to be attributed to ability by the gifted and average groups; instead, the students attributed low task difficulty to their success in the first round of tasks, and high task difficulty to their failure in the second round of tasks. EMR students, however, felt that effort was more responsible for the success and failure they encountered in these tasks (Bogie & Buckhalt). Bogie and Buckhalt suggest that these surprising results may be due to gifted and average students' ability to discern the difficulty level of a task, and to EMR students being more inclined to attribute their performance to internal factors.

Assouline et al. (2006) surveyed 3,280 gifted students (grades 3-11) who participated in either a university-based academic talent search (grades 3-6) or a university based summer residential program (grades 7-11) and asked them questions about how well they were or were not doing in four academic areas: school in general, mathematics, science, and language arts. The questionnaire was comprised of 25 forced-choice items with six possible responses; eight of these questions were concerned with causal attributions. Assouline et al. stated that:

For our questionnaire, the six forced-choice responses were: (1) I am smart, (2) I work hard, (3) the work is easy, (4) I am lucky, (5) my teachers like me, and (6) I do my work the right way. The six attributional choice responses for not doing well were: (1) I am not smart enough, (2) I don't work hard enough, (3) the work is hard, (4) I have bad luck, (5) my teachers don't like me, and (6) I don't do my work the right way. (p. 287)

Assouline et al. notes that these responses fit into Weiner's model of four attributional choices and their corresponding dimensions (locus of control, stability, and controllability). SPSS data analysis techniques were used in order to calculate frequencies for each response (Assouline et al.).

Assouline et al. (2006) found that gifted students attributed success to ability and effort, and they attributed failure to not working hard enough (effort) and task difficulty instead of lack of ability. These findings are particularly interesting as they contradict the study's original hypothesis that gifted students attribute lack of ability to failures, and that the individual's self-worth is subsequently contingent on their own perception of their ability. Assouline et al. note, "gifted students did not summarily question their ability in the face of failure; yet, they were willing to acknowledge their ability when they experienced success" (p. 293).

A more recent study in Finland suggests that Assouline et al.'s (2006) original predictions were not far off the mark after all. In 2007 Nokelainen et al. conducted a study of 203 Finnish adolescents and adults of varying levels of mathematical giftedness, who were divided into three groups. The first group comprised highly mathematically gifted adults who had competed in the International Olympics for Mathematics. The



second group included moderately mathematically gifted secondary students who had taken part in national mathematics competitions. The third group was considered mildly mathematically gifted, and consisted of secondary school students from a technical vocational program that focuses on mathematics as their major subject.

Participants in this study completed a questionnaire that used a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree* that was based on the ability and effort attributional choices from Weiner's model of attribution theory (Nokelainen et al., 2007). Data were analyzed with multivariate factor analysis, which produced significant results ( $p < 0.001$ ) for group differences in attributions. Nokelainen et al. found that the highly and moderately mathematically gifted groups attributed their success to ability more than mildly mathematically gifted, while the mildly gifted group indicated that effort was the greatest contributor to their success. Nokelainen et al. also found that the moderately and mildly gifted groups attributed their failure to a lack of effort, whereas the highly mathematically gifted attributed failure to a lack of ability. Interestingly, this finding supports the hypothesis proposed by Assouline et al. (2006) that states: "gifted students form an identity based on ability and thus would question this ability when confronted with academic failure" (p. 292; see also McNabb, 2003).

Many gifted students have grown up being repeatedly told they are smart and so have developed a skewed view of causal attribution; since they are smart, they do not need to try hard, and if they have to try hard, then that means they really are not smart after all (Assouline et al., 2006; McNabb, 2003). McNabb notes, "the way that students think about ability and effort, especially as these concepts relate to each other, has enormous implications for understanding high ability students' motivation problems" (p.

420). Marsh (1983, as cited in Nokelainen et al., 2007) has found that individuals who attribute ability for their successes, but not their failures, tend to have more positive academic self-concepts and greater academic achievement.

### *Competition, Envy, and Bullying*

Teachers and administrators inadvertently encourage competition between students in the school system simply through the assigning of grades and ranks. The competitive environment is more pronounced with gifted students and often acts as a strong motivator for academic achievement (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). Students recognize that competition and comparison among peers can influence social and academic success in school. Rizza & Reis (2001) found the following:

Participants viewed competition in two different, yet interrelated, ways. The first view was the need for a competitive attitude that resulted in success. The second contrasting view defined competition as a negative force that both eroded relationships and caused derision in groups of students. Although competition was viewed by the participants as a negative force, it was also necessary for their definitions of success and for their motivation to succeed. (p. 57)

Competition can foster the related concept of envy, both between gifted students and directed at gifted students by nongifted peers. Massé and Franfoys (2002) suggest that groups of gifted students with similar abilities are likely to competitively compare achievement and often those who are outperformed experience envy. Being envied can cause “ambivalence, discomfort, and fear rejection” (Massé & Franfoys, p. 15) when students outperform others and are cognizant of possibly engendering envy. Those who are outperformed can also experience negative effects as a result of being envious; these

experiences include strained social relationships, lowered self-esteem, and self-abasement (Massé & Franfoys).

Taken to an extreme, envy and jealousy in outperformed peers (both gifted and nongifted) can manifest in the form of bullying. Peterson and Ray (2006a) suggest that gifted students are vulnerable to bullying because of several factors including being the target of peer jealousy and being socially stigmatized as different because of their giftedness (see also Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). Peterson and Ray (2006a) point out that both gifted and nongifted peers can perpetrate the bullying of gifted students. This bullying can take physical, verbal, emotional, and social forms. As students get older, the bullying shifts from name-calling and pushing to verbal insults, teasing, and social exclusion (Peterson & Ray, 2006a). Peterson and Ray (2006b) found that gifted students could also be the bully and often their bullying takes on a nonphysical form. Gifted children who are bullied are frequently more deeply distressed by it than their nongifted peers. Peterson and Ray (2006b) found that:

Gifted individuals' response to bullying can be intense and prolonged.

Repercussions, for some, are in the form of internalized "fault," perfectionistic avoidance of error, self-doubt, dangerous silence, and a great deal of mental energy directed toward trying to cope with bullying. High-stress moments of helplessness, fear, and lack of control seem to make indelible memories. (p. 262)

Gifted children often face more social obstacles than nongifted students, and repercussions from bullying can wreak havoc on normal social development and self-identity. Peterson and Ray (2006b) note that distress from bullying can impact a child's "perceptions about school, academic performance, and self-confidence" (p. 160). In some

instances gifted individuals will put aside their academic persona and work to develop an acceptable social identity in order to fit in with their age-mates (Gross, 1998). Reis and Renzulli (2004) also noted this to be true, and stated that “in order to feel accepted and make more friends, talented students may deny their academic needs to satisfy social needs” (p. 122).

### *Creating a Gifted Identity*

Gifted students have difficulties with themselves as much as with their peers. Often these social and emotional issues result from inconsistencies between the child’s learning and thinking pace and an unsupportive educational environment (Reis & Renzulli, 2004). The inability of many school programs to meet the needs of gifted children can influence how well children reach their gifted potential and how they internalize their giftedness. Both gifted and nongifted students struggle to define who they are as they grow up, but gifted students must also find a way to incorporate their giftedness into their identity.

Emotional issues in gifted students, such as perfectionism and underachievement, can shape a child’s entire academic self-concept and that can spill over into all dimensions of a student’s life. McHugh (2006) defines perfectionism as exceedingly high standards or expectations for one’s own performance, and acknowledges how perfectionism is often encouraged in a gifted child’s life. This drive for perfection can produce both positive and negative outcomes, either by motivating a student to persist and excel or resulting in “avoidance, anxiety, and failure” (Reis & Renzulli, 2004, p. 122). McHugh notes that:

A long history of high academic success; continual, glowing feedback from teachers and parents; and pressures from school, society, family, and self can

contribute to the idea that peak performance should always be the norm for gifted adolescents. This emphasis on perfect performance instead of mastery learning is also a major contributing factor in neurotic or disabling perfectionism in gifted adolescents because gifted adolescents will set these unrealistic expectations in all areas of their life, and if they do not perform perfectly, they feel like failures. (p. 184-185)

The inverse of perfectionism is underachievement, which can be even more damaging emotionally and socially. Underachievement is described as the disparity between a student's potential and actual performance (Peterson, 2001). Peterson suggests "developmental difficulties, family circumstances, interactions with school personnel, or temperament affect [gifted underachiever's] ability and /or motivation to perform well academically" (p. 236). Underachievement can be a result of unsupportive and unchallenging educational environments (Peterson; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Failure to challenge and engage a student could produce antisocial and antischool tendencies (Peterson). Phillips and Lindsay (2006) suggest that underachievement can be a response to a fear of failure, which can be developed when the expectations of parents and teachers are exceedingly high. Underachievement could also be a product of envy gone awry; the result of academic ability being subverted in order to pursue the social needs of the individual (Gross, 1998; Peterson).

#### Transitioning from Childhood to Adult Giftedness

Giftedness in children is a measure of an internal process that exceeds the accepted normal pace of development. Gifted adults, on the other hand, are recognized by society through achievement and production, and are rewarded for that exhibition of giftedness.

The criterion for giftedness alters as an individual passes from adolescence to adulthood (Gross, 1998; Tolan, 1994). Gifted children are seen as having advanced cognitive development, heightened emotional sensitivity and intensity, and social integration difficulties (Gross, 1998; Tolan, 1994). Tolan notes that:

All of these characteristics, continuing into adulthood, create a different experience of life for the gifted adult, just as they do for the gifted child, whether or not the individual is achieving and being recognized as gifted, whether or not the individual understands and accepts his differences. (§ 23)

Perrone et al. (2007) examined how gifted adults view themselves after leaving the educational system. The purpose of this study was to examine definitions and self-perceptions of giftedness among adults during a longitudinal study of academically talented highschool graduates (Perrone et al.). The sample consisted of 83 adults (29 men and 54 women) who were identified by their school counselors as being in the top five graduates at that school, a national merit scholar, or one of the top two high scores on the ACT. This sample was surveyed 17 years after their highschool graduation.

Perrone et al. (2007) mailed out a 3-part survey and asked the participants to complete and return the survey. The first section contained Silverman's Adult Giftedness Scale, which asks participants to rate the degree to which a characteristic of giftedness describes them. The second section uses the Adult Self-Perception Profile, which assesses an individual's perceptions of their own competencies in 12 domains, including sociability, job competence, morality, intimate relationships, intelligence, and global self-worth. The final section contained open-ended questions dealing with giftedness and how the individuals saw themselves as gifted. Perrone et al. (2007) categorized answers to the

open-ended questions and presented the results as percentages. Perrone et al. also performed Kendall's tau and chi-square tests on the data between questions one and two (whether the individual believed they were gifted in high school and now) and was shown as significant for gender and question agreement.

Perrone et al. (2007) found that the most common definition of giftedness included the ideas of exceptional knowledge and the ability to learn quickly. Both men and women saw positive and negative sides to being viewed as gifted (Perrone et al.). Further, men were more likely to continue to view themselves as gifted while women tended to view their intellectual abilities as fading over time (Perrone et al.). Perrone et al. suggest the imposter phenomenon as one possible reason for this discrepancy in self-perception. This theory proposes that high achieving individuals (most commonly women) believe they are not intelligent or that their accomplishments are attributable only to luck or flawed evaluations by others, and they are constantly fearful of being discovered as fakes, phonies, or imposters (Jacobsen, 1999; Perrone et al.). Individuals suffering from the imposter phenomenon will find any means to negate the external achievements they have accomplished to deny themselves an internal sense of success. Perrone et al. notes that this is a common self-perception problem among gifted females, though it is rarely seen in gifted males. Perrone et al. suggests that this could be "because males in Western society are socialized to believe that being intelligent, high-achieving, and a good provider is part of the 'normal' male role" (¶ 26).

Many researchers recognize certain attributes that characterize giftedness and these characteristics range from cognitive to social to emotional; these characteristics also vary in their intensity with regards to gifted individuals (Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Perrone

et al., 2007; Piechowski, 2006, 2008; Silverman, 1993; Tolan, 1994). Lewis and Kitano investigated psychological intensities of gifted adults in relation to two models of psychological dimensions of giftedness: Clark's model of concomitant problems, which states that "the same heightened sensitivities that underlie superior intelligence may create a potential for 'concomitant problems'" (§ 5), and Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which suggests that gifted individuals can possess extreme sensitivity and intensity in certain areas and that these 'overexcitabilities' can cause psychological instability.

Lewis and Kitano (1992) utilized a two-stage process to select the study sample. Initially, Lewis and Kitano invited all students enrolled in a doctoral program in Education to participate in focus groups. Eleven of the 70 invited students volunteered to participate in the focus group discussions. Next, all of those who had not volunteered to participate in the focus group were mailed a survey and asked to complete the questionnaire. Twenty students responded to the questionnaire, thus bringing the total number of study participants to 31. Individuals who volunteered to participate in the study were divided into two groups and each group participated in a facilitated focus group (Lewis & Kitano). At the beginning of the focus group session, each participant was asked to fill out a questionnaire that was designed by the researchers based on characteristics identified by the two psychological dimensions models. Each question had two rating scales – one that describes how the participant feels, and a second that describes how a typical person of the same age, gender, and culture would feel (Lewis & Kitano). The researchers then asked questions in the group format. The questions dealt with the ideas of overexcitabilities and concomitant problems discussed in the



questionnaire and how the individuals perceived these concepts and how they potentially impacted the participants (Lewis & Kitano). Subjects who did not participate in the focus groups were asked to return the questionnaire by mail.

The questionnaire data were analyzed with factor analysis, and the two rating scales were compared using a *t*-test. Lewis and Kitano's (1992) analysis showed that gifted individuals rated themselves significantly higher than typical persons on the cognitive versatility and the internal motivation factors ( $p < 0.001$  for both factors), while rating themselves significantly lower than a typical person on the need for recognition factor ( $p = 0.039$ ).

Lewis and Kitano (1992) noted that gifted individuals found intellectual and emotional intensity to be the most common and most influential on their lives. Intellectual intensity was characterized by a need for knowledge and persistence in its pursuit, and the concomitant problems associated with this intensity were boredom, feelings of being misunderstood by others, and a sense of isolationism due to perceived differences between the gifted individual and others (Lewis & Kitano). Emotional intensity was characterized by emotional extremes and a need to express this emotionality; conversely, the concomitant problem associated with this intensity was the need to suppress these emotions in order to conform to the expectations of society (Lewis & Kitano).

An interesting finding that emerged from the discussion groups was the difficulty participants had in rating the questionnaire items in terms of others (Lewis & Kitano, 1992). Lewis and Kitano noted that participants "were uncomfortable attempting to answer questions from the viewpoint of others and that they had difficulty identifying the

exact reference group they should use” (§ 34). This finding highlights a common gifted characteristic where gifted individuals often perceive a difference between themselves and their nongifted peers and attribute that difference to the intensity with which they react to the world (Gross, 1998; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2006).

### Adult Education

While many theorists have contributed to the literature on adult learning, the concept of andragogy introduced by Knowles (1968) presents a unique and robust view of how and why adults pursue learning. Andragogy refers to the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 84), and is contrasted with pedagogy – the way that children learn.

Knowles (1968) proposes five assumptions about the adult learner: (a) adult self-concept moves from being dependent to self-directed as a person matures, (b) adult experience accumulates and provides a rich resource of knowledge, (c) an adult’s readiness to learn is contingent on their social context, (d) adults are more problem-centred than subject-centred in their learning, and (e) adults are more internally than externally motivated to learn (Merriam et al., 2007). These assumptions are seen as essential when working with adults, not only in the classroom but when designing adult education programs (Merriam et al.). With these assumptions in mind, Pew (2007) states, “in andragogy, the educational focus is on facilitating the acquisition of and critical thinking about the content and its application in real-life practical settings” (p. 17-18).

The use of andragogical theory and practices in higher education is now becoming more widespread (Haggis, 2004; Pew, 2007; Yoshimoto, Inenaga, & Yamada, 2007).

Yoshimoto et al. note:

Traditional university education was basically tuned only for young and prospective elite students. However, universal access means that the clients are also older students with various careers. The relevance of curriculum and teaching methodology which higher education institutions offer varies for young students or for mature learners, and for the elite-mode and non-elite-mode. (p. 80)

Difficulties in student learning and motivation occur when pedagogical techniques are utilized in learning situations that require andragogical dynamics (Pew, 2007).

Student motivation for pursuing higher education can be attributed to a variety of internal and external stimuli. External motivation can range from career goals to money to personal recognition, while internal motivation “comes from a personal sense of accomplishment that one has grown as an individual” (Pew, 2007, p. 17). According to Dabrowski’s theory of personal disintegration, it is this drive to grow as a person that facilitates motivation for learning, and this drive is strong in gifted individuals (Silverman, 2008).

### Summary of the Literature

The change in definitions and perspectives on intelligence and giftedness over the past century has given rise to an expanded view of giftedness that includes socioemotional and creative dimensions that intertwine with the intellectual aptitude of these individuals (Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 2008; Tolan, 1994). Many researchers have identified heightened sensitivity as a trait commonly seen but rarely measured in gifted individuals, and the identification of this trait focuses attention on the complex social and emotional needs of gifted individuals across the lifespan (Gross, 1998;

Lovecky, 1986; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2006; Pyryt, 2008; Silverman, 2008; Tolan, 1994).

Pyryt (2008) explains how Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and its integral concept of overexcitabilities (heightened sensitivity) exemplify the depth and complexity of experience that characterizes the internal world of gifted individuals. This way of experiencing and understanding the world around them impacts gifted individuals and the relationships they have with the people around them (Silverman, 2008).

It has become apparent in the literature that several factors influence the development of a gifted identity, and that particular care by educators is required when dealing with the social and emotional needs of gifted students (McHugh, 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Some researchers believe that the identity of gifted individuals undergoes a great shift as the individual ages and leaves the educational system (Gross, 1998; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Tolan, 1994). Society's view of giftedness changes from academic potential and achievement to one of exhibition and production at an exceptional level (Jacobsen, 1999; Tolan). An individual's inability to meet this change in expectations of giftedness can greatly impact their perceptions of their own giftedness (Perrone et al., 2007; Tolan).

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGIES AND PROCEDURES

This qualitative phenomenological study uses data from retrospective interviews with 8 gifted adults in various stages of graduate education. This chapter describes the research design, participant and site selection, participant demographics, instrumentation, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, methodological assumptions, processes used to establish credibility, and ethical considerations.

#### Research Methodology and Design

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) recognize two common concepts that underlie all qualitative research approaches: (a) that it is important to focus on and study a phenomenon in a natural setting, and (b) that a phenomenon must be studied in all its complexity. Exploring a phenomenon in its “real world” setting is ideal, but not always possible, especially when a study is looking at a phenomenon retrospectively (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In order to approximate as true a natural setting as possible, I met with the participants in their home, my home, or in an office on the university campus, whichever felt most comfortable for them and allowed the interview to take place in an uncontrived and uninterrupted environment.

Qualitative research embraces the complexities of the phenomenon being studied, and tries to reveal a detailed understanding of the underlying phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). Giftedness is understood to be a complex and dynamic phenomenon, with facets that span the intellectual, social, and emotional dimensions (Pyryt, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2003; Whitmore, 1980), and evolve across the lifespan (Gross, 1998; Terman, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947, 1959; Tolan, 1994).

The aim of phenomenological qualitative research is to gain various insider perspectives on a specific phenomenon as it is lived and experienced, through exploring and examining the complexity surrounding “people’s perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 139). It is important to note that phenomenological research focuses on “how persons actually lived through and interpreted situations” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 30). This type of exploration can reveal common themes in the experiences of individuals within a phenomenon despite a wide diversity of perspectives and settings (Leedy & Ormrod).

In order to explore the perceptions and experiences of gifted adults and gain an insider perspective of the phenomenon, a phenomenological research design was used (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) state that “phenomenology refers to a person’s perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists external to the person” (p. 139). With this definition in mind, a phenomenological research design utilized open-ended questions in lengthy one-on-one interviews in order to address gifted adults’ perception of giftedness and its impact on their academic lives. By looking at eight different perspectives of the same phenomenon, common threads in the lived experiences of gifted individuals were exposed.

#### Selection of Site and Participants

Before beginning a search for possible research participants, an Application for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants was submitted to the Brock University Research Ethics Board. Approval to proceed with the study was received from the board after a complete ethical review of the research proposal (File #08-135). (See Appendix A.)

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to select 8 adult participants who were identified as gifted in elementary school and had completed a Bachelor's degree. I utilized two distinct yet complimentary strategies in order to select the most comprehensive group of participants. Homogenous sampling is a strategy used by researchers to "purposefully sample individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell, 2008, p. 216), and in this study that subgroup refers to previously identified gifted adults. At the same time, I employed maximal variation sampling, which Creswell defines as a "purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait" (p. 214). In this instance, all participants had completed a Bachelor's degree, but are engaged in various stages of graduate education. Such specific sampling was appropriate for this study because of the small size of the gifted subgroup participant pool, and the specificity of the research questions being addressed.

Identifying a pool of potential adult participants that fits the requirement of being identified as gifted as children is challenging, and relies on individuals self-reporting themselves as gifted. In order to facilitate this process, a poster identifying the study and requesting volunteers was posted in several locations on a university campus in Southern Ontario and also emailed to friends and family of the researcher with an emphasis on participation being voluntary and confidential. I believed that participants that already had an established relationship with the researcher would be more comfortable and more willing to provide open, honest, and personal perspectives on giftedness.

Participants were given a choice of interview sites, including their own home, my home, or an office on a university campus in Southern Ontario. These choices allowed

participants to maximize their own comfort when discussing their personal experiences and still allow the interviews to be conducted in a fairly natural setting.

Potential participants contacted me via phone or email to set up a meeting time, and a combined letter of invitation/consent form was emailed out at that time to familiarize them with the purpose of the study, the time commitment required, and the possible benefits and risks associated with the study. At the first interview session, the consent form was reviewed and signed before commencing the interview. Extra copies of the consent form were on hand in the event a participant forgot to bring the form to the interview.

#### Description of Participants

Table 2 provides a summary of the participants in this study. The 4 male and 4 female participants' ages ranged between 25 and 38 years old. All 8 participants completed a Bachelor's degree within the last 16 years at a postsecondary institution in Canada, but their engagement in graduate education ranged from nothing (3 participants) to postgraduate diplomas (1 participant) to partial completion of/current enrollment in a graduate degree program (2 participants) to a completed graduate degree program (2 participants). Seven of the 8 participants were involved in part-time gifted programs during elementary school, and only 1 participant was involved in a full-time enrichment immersion program. Six of the 8 participants were involved in some type of gifted program in secondary school, either enriched classes in English, math and science, or a separate enrichment class, but none of the participants were involved in a full immersion program.



Table 2

*Summary of Participant Profiles*

Participant Pseudonym	Sex/Age	Grade Identified as Gifted	Type of Gifted Program in Elementary School	Type of Gifted Program in Secondary School	Higher Education Attained or Pursued Past Bachelor's Degree
1. Barry	M / 31	Grade 3 or 4	Part-time in-school	--	Applied to grad school
2. Chuck	M / 38	Grade 5 or 6	Part-time in-school	A separate enrichment course, available once per grade level	Teacher's college
3. Kya	F / 30	Grade 2	Part-time in-school	A few enriched level courses; mainly sciences	--
4. Lance	M / 33	Grade 4	Full immersion for grades 5-8	A few enriched level courses: math, science, & English	Two postgraduate diplomas
5. Rachael	F / 34	Grade 2	Part-time in-school	Enriched English in Grade 9	Started Master's
6. Sadie	F / 32	Grade 4	Part-time in-school	A separate enrichment course, available once per grade level	Currently enrolled in Master's
7. Tatiana	F / 25	Grade 2 or 3	Part-time in-school	A few enriched level courses; mainly sciences	Completed Master's
8. Winston	M / 26	Grade 5 or 6	Part-time in-school	--	Completed Master's

### Instrumentation

Phenomenological research focuses on the personal meaning individuals place on events or situations, and accordingly, two open-ended, in-depth interviews along with a journaling task were used to elicit robust research data that would allow deeper insights into the lived experiences of gifted individuals (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The Brock University Research Ethics Board approved the interview guides and journaling instructions prior to the commencement of the study. (See Appendices B, C, and D.) All questions were developed with careful consideration taken to ensure participants were not exposed to any undue psychological, emotional, or social harm while still enabling the opportunity to gain insight into the research topic. Open-ended questions were used to allow the participants to voice their lived experiences and present their perspectives free from any constraints brought to the questions by my own personal biases (Creswell, 2008). All participants were made aware that there was a small potential for intense positive and negative emotions to surface as a result of discussing experiences surrounding giftedness and the role it plays in one's self-concept. To offset this possibility, a journaling task was also included in the research design, both as a triangulation method and as a technique that allowed the participant to feel safer while examining their emotions and experiences. Table 3 presents a matrix of this study's four research questions in relation to the interview questions from the first interview. Fifteen broad questions were asked in the first interview protocol, along with a few prompts when necessary to expand on a participant's response. Sample questions included: Tell me about your personal academic expectations. Do you still think of yourself as gifted? How have others' perceptions of you as gifted or talented impacted your self-perception

Table 3

*Research Questions in Relation to First Interview Questions Matrix*

Research Questions	First Interview Questions
Background questions	1, 2, 3
How have individuals' self-perceptions and understanding of giftedness changed over time?	4, 9, 10, 11, 12
How has being identified as gifted influenced an individual's perceptions of education?	5, 6, 7, 8,
How do those perceptions influence their pursuit of graduate education?	13, 14, 15
How do gifted individual's perceive the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness?	-- <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> This research question was addressed at the end of the second interview when a broader definition of giftedness was introduced to the participants.

of your giftedness? Tell me about the attributes that you think characterize you as gifted now. Tell me how being identified as gifted has impacted your pursuit of graduate education? Questions in the second interview were formulated from the data gathered in the first interview and tailored to each individual in order to expand and explore important insights that emerged from the first interview.

### Data Collection and Recording

Three types of data collection took place during this study: interviews, observational and reflective field notes, and a journaling task. The main source of data collection was a series of one-on-one, open-ended interviews. Each participant was involved in two interviews, the first lasting roughly 60-90 minutes, and the second lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a hand held digital voice recorder with a built-in microphone (Panasonic RR-US750 IC Recorder). Observational and reflective field notes were made during and immediately following each interview. The interviews were spaced 2 weeks apart and a take home journaling task was assigned between interviews.

In order to ensure confidentiality, participants selected pseudonyms prior to commencing the first interview, and were identified only by this name on all data sources (audio recordings, interview transcripts, and journal documents). Any other identifiers were also stripped from the data sources. Confidentiality of participants and data was secured during and after the conduct of research through password-protected files transferred to compact disc and stored in private, locked locations in my residence. A master list of participant identifiers was kept separately from the collected data.

The first interview began with an explanation about how the interview would proceed and a reminder to the participant of the purpose of the study and the research questions being addressed. I explained that I would ask questions designed to encourage the participant to speak freely and openly about his/her experiences and perceptions as a gifted individual. The participants were made aware at this time that they did not have to answer any question that they felt was invasive, inappropriate, or offensive, and that they could ask to stop at any point and I would turn off the voice recorder. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from this project at any stage without penalty.

The first few questions in the interview were used to make the participant comfortable with talking about giftedness, and then questions were presented in order to focus the conversation on self-perceptions and their influence on academic pursuit. During the interview, I recorded observational field notes about the participants' nonverbal behaviours, such as body language including posture, facial expressions, and gestures. After each interview I also took the time to record reflective field notes that explored any personal insights, feelings, or broad themes that emerged during the interview (Creswell, 2008).

The journaling task was explained at the end of the first interview. Each participant was asked to document some of his/her personal experiences about growing up gifted, and to reflect on what was discussed during the interview. If any thoughts or insights emerged, I encouraged the participant to write them down and explore them. For example, I asked participants to think about educational experiences they had had as a child, an adolescent, or an adult; about how they feel as a gifted individual and what makes them gifted; about how being gifted affected how they experienced life; and about

successes, failures, and stumbling blocks they had encountered during their academic careers. I encouraged the participants to use any method (words, pictures, graphs, tables, poetry) to share their thoughts and feelings. The participants were given 2 weeks to complete the task before handing it in at the second interview, and could journal as often as they wanted during that 2-week period. The questions in the second interview evolved from the initial data analysis of the first interview transcript. Tailored questions for each individual were used to investigate and expand on some of the thoughts and themes extracted from that data.

Once both interviews were transcribed, the participant was emailed a copy of the transcript and asked to check it. Clarifications and modifications were done at that time. The participants had the option of emailing back their notes or meeting in person to discuss the transcripts. I transcribed all interviews myself in order to ensure maximum confidentiality and be more involved with the data. A feedback letter was emailed to the participants once all interviews were completed, and they were given the opportunity to request an executive summary of the results upon completion of the study.

### Data Processing and Analysis

Data collection resulted in a vast amount of information and, in order to organize it and find some comprehensive meaning, I used two different yet complimentary analysis techniques: (a) the interpretive phenomenological analysis method as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003), and (b) the listening guide method described by Gilligan et al. (2003).

Within 5 days of each interview, I transcribed the digital recordings into text. I carefully transcribed each word and made sure to note any lengthy pauses, laughter,

interruptions, and inaudible remarks (Creswell, 2008). The data were examined using the following steps outlined below. Once transcription was complete, I read each transcript and journaling document along with any accompanying field notes multiple times in order to get an overall sense of the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I knew that I needed a broad understanding of the data in order to narrow my focus and pick out the themes and insights that were most relevant to my research questions. I chose to hand analyze the data rather than use computer software because the data set was small and also as a way to be close to the data. Creswell describes hand analysis as a process where “researchers read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts” (p. 246). As a first time researcher, I thought this approach would help me understand the intricacies involved in analyzing text data and provide some insight for my discussion of the findings and implications.

For the first phase of analysis, I followed the steps outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003) for the interpretive phenomenological analysis method. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is concerned with the meanings participants construct about their mental and social world (Smith & Osborn). Smith and Osborn state that the “aim is to try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency” (p. 64). The preliminary step in this process required me to read a transcript several times and annotate interesting or significant comments made by the participant in the left-hand margin. There are no rules regarding what should be commented on, and no pressure to assign a comment to every section of text. Smith and Osborn acknowledge that some portions of a transcript will be richer in meaning than others. Many of the comments made were attempts to summarize or paraphrase the

participant, gain an overall sense of the participant, or preliminary interpretations. I then repeated the step with the participant's second interview transcript and his/her journaling document. Another reading of the transcripts and journaling document uses the right-hand margin to record emerging themes.

The next step in this process involved connecting themes. All of the themes from the right-hand margin were written on a piece of paper, and then I looked for connections and began to cluster the themes together. During this stage, I was very aware of the particular phrasing a participant used, wanting to stay as true as possible to what the participant was saying while I clustered themes. I also documented any key phrases that supported the connected themes. Following this, I compiled the themes into a table and repeated the entire process with the other participants' transcripts and journaling documents. I used the themes from the first case as a guide, but was careful to allow new themes to emerge. Once all of the transcripts and journaling documents were analyzed, I compiled all of the themes into a master table and looked for any new connections or clusters that would refine the themes.

The final step in this process was to write up the findings as a means of outlining the meaning the phenomenon had in the participants' lives. The themes that emerged were explained and interpreted in a narrative report that used verbatim extracts to illustrate and support the findings.

A second and contrapuntal method of analysis was applied to the data using Gilligan et al.'s (2003) listening guide method. The listening guide, a voice-centered method of analysis, was designed to elicit the inner voices of the participants, which would enable the researcher to become more intimately connected to and aware of their



internal worlds. This method provides a unique insider's perspective of the phenomenon being studied, which is consistent with the overall phenomenological approach of this study, and also enables the researcher to present the distinctive and multifaceted perspectives of the participants. In order to add depth to the study, it was deemed appropriate to include an approach that was "distinctly different from traditional methods of coding, in that one listens to, rather than categorizes or quantifies the text of the interview" (p. 132, Tolman, 2001 as cited in Gilligan et al., 2003).

The listening guide contains four steps that are used in conjunction, and these steps were adapted in order to more concisely address the needs and research questions of this study. The first step in the listening guide approach involves reading both interview transcripts and the journaling document of a participant while listening for plots, themes, or stories that emerge. At this point the researcher acknowledges her own reactions to the transcripts and uses this active participation to select the passages for the second step in the listening process. For all of the participants, I chose to use the journaling document as the basis for the I poem. Interviews, while adept at eliciting material that is rich and spontaneous, are often repetitive and rambling. In contrast, the journaling task allowed the participants to focus and present their thoughts and experiences in a concise and articulate manner. The participants did not know they were writing an I poem as they wrote their journal, and I felt that this focused writing would provide the best data from which to elicit their true and unexamined feelings about being gifted.

The second step in this process is the creation of I poems from the text as a means of providing an opportunity to hear the unique voices of the participants. I poems focus on the first person voice in the text, picking up on the distinct rhythms and tones of the

participant. I poems explore the inner voices of the participants as they speak about their life, and often reveal themes, emotions, and contrapuntal voices not heard in the previous phases of analysis. I followed Gilligan et al.'s (2003) suggested rules for I poem construction:

- (a) underline or select every first-person "I" within the passage you have chosen along with the verb and any seemingly important accompanying words and (b) maintain the sequence in which these phrases appear in the text. Then pull out the underlined "I" phrases, keeping them in the order they appear in the text, and place each phrase on a separate line, like lines in a poem ... Often the I poem itself will seem to fall readily into stanzas—reflecting a shift in meaning or change in voice, the ending of a cadence or the start of a new breath. (pp. 162-163)

These I poems captured powerful and profound illustrations of the internal consciousness of gifted adults, often revealing unexpected meanings and themes, and offered a different perspective for viewing their experiences.

Once the I poems were written, they were examined for contrapuntal voices, which allow the researcher to "begin to identify, specify, and sort out the different strands in the interview that may speak to our research question" (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 165). Gilligan et al. suggest using the entire transcript when searching for contrapuntal voices, but I decided to limit my examination to the I poems where I could focus on the first-person voice of the participant. In every poem at least two contrapuntal voices were identified, each highlighting a different facet of the individual's experience. The relationship between these voices, either contradictory or complimentary, was explored.

The final step in the listening guide process was to analyze and summarize the themes that emerged from the listening. I focused on the contrapuntal voices elicited in the examination in step three and how they related to the main research question.

### Methodological Assumptions

This study was based on several methodological assumptions, which will be explored in this section. Several important assumptions were made about the participants and about the phenomenon of giftedness.

It was assumed that academic success was important to all gifted individuals and the development of their self-concept to some degree. It was also assumed that all gifted individuals who had pursued higher education and obtained a Bachelor's degree had, at some point, either thought about pursuing or had actively pursued graduate education. It was assumed that all gifted individuals had experienced positive and negative experiences that were related to being identified as gifted, and that these experiences influenced how individuals viewed themselves. All participants signed a consent form, and so it was assumed that all individuals participated willingly in the interviews and journaling task and understood the purpose of the study and their rights as participants.

Assumptions about the phenomenon of giftedness were also made, and these assumptions were based on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, and particularly on the theoretical framework used to shape this study. It was assumed that giftedness is a complex and dynamic phenomenon with intellectual, social, and emotional dimensions. In addition, it was assumed that gifted individuals possess heightened sensitivities or overexcitabilities, and that this quality of experience influenced the participants' perspectives and perceptions.

### Limitations

Several limitations of this study have been discerned and attempts have been made to remedy, or at least minimize, these limitations throughout the course of the study. One significant limitation was the inexperience of the researcher in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data. With increased experience, a more meticulous and comprehensive analysis of data may have been obtained. In order to minimize the limitations of my inexperience, much guidance, direction, advice, and support was offered from the Faculty Advisor and the other committee members. Their thorough questioning and useful suggestions helped direct me in shaping a stronger, more robust study.

This study also had limitations with respect to the selection of participants. The pool of participants was self-reported gifted individuals and I had to trust this identification to be accurate. Unfortunately, there is no means to collect original identification measures for gifted adults, and the scope of this study was not sufficient to establish an individual's identification as or degree of giftedness using available quantitative measures.

Another significant limitation was the measurement problem inherent in the retrospective and self-reporting nature of this research study. Participants were asked to comment on and share stories about past experiences and perceptions. Relying on the memory of participants may have presented a distorted or incomplete view of reality, as people are prone to remember what they think they should or might have happened as opposed to what actually happened (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Although this limitation may appear to be a shortcoming, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) suggest that much can be

learned from examining what the participants remember about their experiences.

Furthermore, participants may even unintentionally alter their stories to incorporate what they think the researcher is hoping to hear (Creswell, 2008).

This study recognizes the complexity of giftedness and the multitude of variables and factors that can influence its recognition, acceptance, and incorporation, both for the individual and in a social context. In this study there were two factors that were not controlled: the degree of giftedness and the type of giftedness. Giftedness can be seen along a continuum, with some individuals displaying mild or moderate levels of giftedness, while others exhibit high or exceptional degrees of giftedness (Piechowski, 2006; Terman, 1925). Giftedness can also manifest in various forms, from mathematical prowess to musical prodigies to anything in between. Without original identification criteria, it is difficult and inappropriate to classify individuals as mildly, moderately, or highly gifted. Due to the small size of this study, and the limited availability of self-disclosing gifted adults, I chose not to limit my sample by imposing further restrictions for degree and type of giftedness.

Results of this qualitative study will not be repeatable or generalized beyond the sample used in this study. The sample size was small, involving only eight adults, and a larger sample size would have strengthened the results. This study was just one glimpse into the lives of gifted adults and a longitudinal study that examined giftedness and academic pursuit at different life stages may have elicited richer results.

This study was limited by the participants' degree of trust and comfort with me as the researcher. I purposefully selected participants that I had previously established relationships with in order to provide a higher level of comfort in the hopes that it would

allow for a richer quality and greater depth in their responses. At the same time, the interview format, while open-ended and spontaneous, was an unnatural conversation setting. The presence of a digital voice recorder and the knowledge that the conversation would be transcribed and used in a thesis may have made the participants feel nervous and awkward. To minimize these limitations, I started all interviews with light conversation to help them relax in that setting. The participants were aware that the transcripts of the interviews would be made available for review and that any clarifications, modifications, or deletions could be made at that time if they wished.

### Establishing Credibility

Several steps were taken in order to ensure that the results of this study are credible. The main data collection method was two in-depth interviews, the first interview lasted 60-90 minutes and the second interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, which resulted in a robust set of data. In addition to the series of one-on-one interviews, the journaling task and observational and reflective field notes made by the researcher were used to provide corroborating evidence for the results. The use of multiple data sources allows for triangulation of data and supports the themes that emerged in the interview transcripts (Creswell, 2008). As well, audio recording of the interviews and member checking were supplementary strategies utilized to strengthen the triangulation. By recording the interviews I was able to ensure that I could accurately capture the thoughts and feelings of the participants. I also used member checking to provide the opportunity for participants to read and check the accuracy of the transcripts of their interviews and make clarifications, modifications, or deletions, as they felt necessary.

This study utilized two data analysis methods in order to strengthen the findings: the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003). By combining multiple data sources with several complementary analysis techniques, the findings are likely to be more credible (Creswell, 2008).

### Ethical Considerations

Before proceeding with the participant selection and data collection for this study, I received clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board (File #08-135) and followed Brock University's ethical guidelines regarding the protection of participant's rights. All participants volunteered for this study and signed a consent form.

Creswell (2008) acknowledges the importance of being up front and honest with participants regarding the focus of the study and the topics that are likely to be discussed. Every participant in this study was made aware of how the interview process would proceed, the purpose of the study, and the problem being addressed. All participants were also informed that during the interviews they did not have to answer any question that they felt was invasive, inappropriate, or offensive, and could ask to stop the voice recorder at any point. Having the participants select pseudonyms prior to the first interview, and using that pseudonym on all transcripts, journaling documents, digital recordings, and reports assured the confidentiality of the data. The data were also only accessible to my faculty advisor and myself.

This study contained no physical or social risks to the participants. While it was unlikely that there would be any psychological risks, there was a small potential for intense positive and negative emotions to surface as a result of discussing experiences

surrounding giftedness and the role it plays in one's self-concept. In order to minimize this potential risk, the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time from the project on three separate occasions: at the time of consent and before beginning each of the interviews. Should participants choose to withdraw from the project for any reason, they were assured that all data (digital, audio, and paper) would be immediately destroyed and that there would be no consequences for the participant.

#### Restatement of the Problem

This study explores gifted adults' perception of their own giftedness and how those perceptions influenced their pursuit of graduate education. More specifically, it investigates the perception of giftedness of 8 adults as revealed by retrospective interviews. This qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand the intellectual, social, and emotional dynamics of giftedness and the role it plays in academic pursuit. The themes and voices that emerged after data analysis are discussed in Chapter Four. These findings contribute to a growing understanding and knowledge of gifted individuals across the lifespan and of the need for strategies to support gifted individuals and their pursuit of academics.



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this research study. This study uses qualitative data to examine the perceptions of 8 gifted adults as revealed through retrospective interviews and a journaling task. Data collection produced an extensive amount of information, which was analyzed using two distinct yet complimentary methods: (a) the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) to expose emerging themes, and (b) an adaptation of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003) to reveal the inner world and distinct multi-layered voices of individual participants. The first part of this chapter profiles the participants as revealed through the use of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al.). Each participant's I poem and a brief analysis of themes and contrapuntal voices are included in this section. The second part of this chapter presents the major findings of this study as identified using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn). Themes are supported by paraphrases and quotations taken from the interview transcripts and journaling documents and are discussed under five main headings: Evolution of Giftedness, Success and Failure, Expectations, Effort, and Doubt and Proof.

### Listening to Participants' Voices

In order to learn and understand more about the inner world of the participants, an adaptation of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003) was used. This approach provided a unique and personal perspective of the phenomenon of giftedness and revealed the feelings behind the themes that emerged in the interpretive phenomenological analysis method. A summary of participants' voices is presented in Table 4. The listening guide method recognized the participants' distinct voices and

Table 4

*Summary of Participants' Voices*

Participant	Voice 1	Contrapuntal Voices Voice 2	Voice 3
Barry	Voice of regret	Voice of disconnect	
Chuck	Voice of loss	Voice of responsibility	Voice of doubt
Kya	Voice of pressure and expectation	Voice of inadequacy	Voice of difference
Lance	Voice of entitlement	Voice of wonderment	
Rachael	Voice of doubt and proof	Voice of untapped potential	
Sadie	Voice of exclusion	Voice of substantiation	
Tatiana	Voice of awareness	Voice of questioning	
Winston	Voice of detachment	Voice of inclusion	

allowed the true and often unexamined feelings of the participants' experience of giftedness to be exposed. The listening guide method lead the researcher through a series of steps including listening for plot, constructing I poems, identifying contrapuntal voices, and composing an analysis. Each gifted individual's I poem was constructed from his/her journaling task and a brief analysis is included below.

The I poems highlight the unique contributions of each of the participants and the individual stories represented in this study. These poems reveal a range of contrapuntal voices, adding depth to the exploration of giftedness across the lifespan as perceived by gifted adults. By focusing on the first person voices of the participants, it was possible to explore how these individuals see themselves and the role giftedness plays in their lives. Reflections on and analysis of the I poems revealed a broad range of themes, emotions, and contrapuntal voices. For Tatiana, her complimentary voices of awareness and questioning reflected her understanding of her giftedness and its role in her life. For several other participants, contrasting voices of regret, loss, doubt, difference, and detachment illustrate their frustrations with and misunderstanding of their own giftedness. While most of the voices exist on the more negative end of the spectrum, there are a few positive voices, like Lance's voice of wonderment, which help to balance the negativity expressed regarding giftedness in their lives. Many of the participants' I poems exude a sense of sadness, which are seen through voices of disconnect, loss, inadequacy, untapped potential, and exclusion. Even though the voices in these poems illustrate the trials and tribulations of living with giftedness, the overall perspective on being gifted is a very positive one – a way of being that no one would give up.

The following I poems illustrate the personal impact that being gifted had on these individuals' lives and the emotional undercurrents that stayed with them across the lifespan.

*Barry*

I'm not  
 I've tried  
 My post-school life  
 As I reflect  
 I realize now  
 I never felt  
 I knew  
 I had to succeed  
 I would go to university  
 My giftedness  
 My choice of study and career path  
 I often feel  
 I wasn't mature  
 I do  
 I don't  
 I have come to terms  
 If I were 18 again  
 I know  
 I certainly wouldn't  
 I feel now  
 I neglected certain interests  
 I consider my choice.

I feel as though that label certainly singled me out  
 I recall  
 I came to university  
 I again feel comfortable  
 I think  
 I was surrounded by other gifted people  
 I met my friends today  
 I would say my greatest success  
 I believe  
 I feel.

I began to feel a certain disconnect  
 I really valued the types of relationships I forged on campus  
 I had  
 I was not finding that in the postschool world

I did find  
 I really missed the academic world  
 I was bettering myself  
 I find  
 I'm surrounded by others.

I've been pondering  
 I simply assumed  
 I was prone to dismiss  
 I think  
 I downplay my giftedness  
 I never really gave the label much merit  
 I was good at school  
 I would say  
 I do feel my frustration  
 I feel  
 I fail to connect with others  
 I feel  
 I may be  
 I get frustrated  
 I'm passionate  
 I feel  
 I don't know  
 Maybe I'm an elitist snob  
 I seem to feel I'm always off in the clouds thinking  
 I feel like there is a real disconnect  
 I never connected  
 I've considered it  
 I want to explore.

Through multiple listenings of Barry's I poem, two distinct contrapuntal voices became apparent: *a voice of regret* and *a voice of disconnect*. Barry's voice of regret demonstrates an understanding and awareness of how being labeled as gifted can create a narrow view of worthwhile pursuits. Barry remarks on being pigeonholed into a particular academic and career path, and that he would make different choices if he could do it all over again. This voice uncovers a void in his academic university career and demonstrates his sadness at being directed down this path. This self-awareness helps him find value in nonacademic pursuits, particularly in relationships, later in life. He refers to

the friends he made in university, friendships he maintains to this day, as his greatest success. In contrast, Barry does not consider his academic record in university a success by any means.

There is also a voice of disconnect evident in Barry's I poem. While Barry values his relationships with other gifted individuals from university, he repeatedly mentions a sense of disconnect with people in general. Barry's reflections illustrate an internal struggle of wanting to connect and not being able to bridge a gap between the gifted and the nongifted and their differences in thinking and experiencing. This sentiment was supported by the phrases "I fail to connect with others", "I'm surrounded by others", "I was not finding that in the postschool world", and "I never connected." Barry feels disappointed in other people's inability or disinterest in thinking about the bigger picture, since he constantly questions and reflects on what life means and his place in the world. He "feels that most people's lives are wrapped up in minutiae, focused on matters of little consequence" and realizes that he lives his life very differently.

Although these two voices appear to be unrelated, it is interesting to note that the voice of regret leads Barry to value relationships, and yet it is that aspect of his life where he experiences the most internal strife and disconnect. It is the juxtaposition of these two voices that allows Barry to grow beyond his narrow academic definition of giftedness, and find value in aspects of his life that are not immediately connected with his original view.

*Chuck*

I took a kind of intelligence test  
I was labeled  
I went on  
I see

I like things that are cut and dried, black and white  
 I can  
 I imagine subjects at which I excelled  
 I abandoned in university  
 I enjoyed  
 I did well  
 Despite my wrong-headed detour  
 I was gifted  
 I may still be  
 I teach  
 I teach all the subjects  
 My favourite subject  
 My least favourite  
 I am still  
 I love to do  
 I like to do  
 I can't stand doing  
 I love  
 I would have been better off.

I was no longer gifted  
 I thought the giftedness left me in university  
 I was pursuing my real talents  
 Only sufficient to get me good marks  
 Got me labeled as gifted  
 Identified me for success in school, but not necessarily for success beyond school.

I really did  
 Killed my giftedness  
 I do know  
 I haven't  
 I have been working as hard as I know how  
 I still feel  
 I haven't reclaimed the lofty heights of giftedness and brainpower  
 I had when I was 12  
 Did I really lose something in the transition from adolescence to adulthood?

I suppose being labeled gave me high expectations  
 I came up against the stoic disinterest of the real world  
 I collapsed  
 I did get good marks  
 I was just disgusted  
 My lack of interest and effort  
 I really knew  
 I went wrong  
 Perhaps I could make it right again.

I don't regret being labeled gifted  
 I just wish  
 I could have kept on being, or feeling, gifted.

Every time I read Chuck's I poem, I hear a wistfulness, a sadness – *a voice of loss*. His loss rushes over me in waves and touches me deeply, as I too have believed my giftedness to be lost and gone forever. After Chuck's second interview, I reflected on the air of sadness about him when he talked about giftedness. That sadness is echoed in his I poem, and I get the impression he has reflected deeply since our last interview, and while he acknowledges he was once gifted, he is convinced that he lost his giftedness somewhere near the end of high school. While Chuck would like to rekindle his giftedness, if it was possible, I do not think he believes he ever could. He still questions his own giftedness in his youth, even when presented with expanded definitions of giftedness. At times he does not think he was ever truly gifted. I get the sense that he is silently searching for that gift he once had, perhaps without realizing it. Chuck appears to have lost a lot of self-confidence along with his giftedness, and try as he might, he cannot work hard enough to rekindle the fire and personal power that believing wholeheartedly in one's own giftedness can provide.

This voice of loss goes hand-in-hand with *a voice of responsibility*; Chuck believes that the loss of his giftedness is his fault, a failure within himself to stay gifted. This sense of responsibility for losing his giftedness is supported by such phrases as "Killed my giftedness", "I went wrong", and "Perhaps I could make it right again." Since the loss of his giftedness was his fault, then the responsibility to regain his giftedness is also on his shoulders, and the weight of this responsibility fuels his desire to acquire proof that his giftedness is still there, buried deep inside.



There is a third voice in Chuck's I poem that is woven into the background and intertwined with the other voices; it is *a voice of doubt*. Chuck doubts the extent and robustness of his giftedness in his youth, and repeatedly implies that what he thought was giftedness was only enough talent to get him good grades – his benchmark of giftedness and success. This voice insinuates that he was never truly gifted. Perhaps his almost unconscious search for his giftedness is a means of refuting the doubt that haunts him.

*Kya*

I remember loving school  
 I remember being pulled out of class  
 I remember sitting in a different group  
 I never was  
 I was not normal.

I was always expected to have the right answer  
 I admitted to not doing my homework  
 I would work  
 I never was involved in class  
 I could  
 I didn't  
 I never needed to take notes  
 I would help the other children  
 I was not bored in Enhanced Science  
 I always found it interesting.

I couldn't learn the same way  
 I could no longer  
 I had to learn how to study  
 I was failing somehow  
 I didn't get  
 I felt  
 I had failed  
 I should have done better  
 I found it harder  
 I wouldn't know the answers  
 I'd start to have panic attacks  
 I'd have  
 I got my degree  
 I felt  
 I was running away

I wasn't going farther  
I didn't feel proud or happy  
I felt a sense of relief that it was over  
I didn't do better  
I felt  
I couldn't enjoy school  
I was letting everyone down.

I always feel  
I could and should be doing more  
I feel  
I should get more done  
I should always have the answer  
If I don't  
I feel inadequate  
I know they don't expect  
I have  
I don't know  
I feel lazy  
I should have been doing more  
I always feel this constant need to learn more  
I find  
I'm interested  
I'll go  
I can  
I'm still interested  
I just never want to do an exam or test again.

I still find myself feeling different  
I know  
I don't feel proud  
I feel inadequate  
I've never  
I don't see myself  
I never went  
I didn't.

I was expected  
I would go  
I had to  
I wasn't filling my potential.

I always felt special  
I wasn't normal  
I still don't feel like I'm normal  
I don't feel special anymore.

Kya's I poem evokes three very loud voices, all connected but not quite complimentary: *a voice of pressure and expectation, a voice of inadequacy, and a voice of difference*. The loudest presence in this I poem is the voice of pressure and expectation, which manifests as an external pressure and set of expectations. Kya revealed that many of her family's hopes and dreams were placed on her, and she felt it was her responsibility to fulfill their expectations. Her giftedness superimposed an expectation for her future, and people around her supported that expectation.

There are times in Kya's I poem where the voices of pressure and expectation and of inadequacy sing together, and this song is supported by her repetition of "I should" statements. It seems that no matter how hard Kya strives to meet the expectations of others, she somehow feels she always falls short. This could be due to Kya's own wants and desires conflicting with the expectations of family, friends, and teachers. Even after she accomplishes the goal of completing her Bachelor's degree, Kya feels inadequate and that she failed to reach her potential. Kya was quite explicit in acknowledging her perceived inadequacy by saying "I was letting everyone down", "I feel inadequate", and "I wasn't filling my potential." The pressure of fulfilling those expectations devalued the goals she accomplished, and she felt that she was "running away" from her family's expectations, her potential, and her own giftedness when she chose not to pursue graduate education.

Kya's I poem begins and ends with the voice of difference. At first it seems that her difference was a result of the special treatment she received at school that her giftedness garnered. There was a physical difference in the classroom, "I remember being pulled out of class" and "I remember sitting in a different group," but she internalizes that

difference and states that she is not normal. Kya explains how all through elementary and secondary school she felt different, and that difference was at times something to be proud of and something to be ashamed of. When she reached university she finally met some “kindred spirits” – people that thought, felt, and experienced the world like she did, and her perception of herself and her world changed. She felt normal in this context, but her specialness began to fade. Kya’s academic struggles in university, her internal struggle with the expectations placed on her, and her decision to not meet those expectations after her undergraduate degree reestablish her feelings of difference, but without that specialness that had originally provided her with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

*Lance*

I recall  
 I was first identified  
 It went to my head  
 Telling me how special I was  
 I had special needs  
 I was  
 I’ve sometimes wondered  
 If I was wonderful, what was there to prove?

I recall  
 I understand  
 I think  
 I just figured it was my due!

I don’t recall  
 I’m also confused as to why  
 I’m fortunate  
 I don’t know  
 I simply wonder.

There is a very loud voice that resonates throughout Lance’s I poem: *a voice of entitlement*. Lance’s sense of entitlement is not an innate part of his giftedness, but a

result of the educational atmosphere where he was introduced to the label of giftedness – the almost overwhelming fawning over his abilities from the teachers, administrators, and researchers he encountered. Lance remarked that as he got older he was very cognizant about keeping his ego in check; he wanted to stay grounded and humble. He believed his parents were instrumental in helping him maintain this modest perspective.

Lance's I poem contains a soft, yet complimentary voice that offsets the harshness of the voice of entitlement, and that is *a voice of wonderment*. The last stanza of the I poem illustrates Lance's recognition of his gift, and that it is a gift. He acknowledges that he does not understand why he is gifted and others are not, and he is aware how fortunate he is. While being gifted has its own trials, there is a preciousness about it that cannot be taken for granted.

*Rachael*

I left  
 I have been  
 I find myself unsure  
 I feel  
 I do believe  
 I was a gifted child  
 I had a good memory  
 I seemed to understand things on a different level  
 I don't feel gifted now  
 I am trying to figure out how  
 I came from one point to the other  
 I work  
 I judge my intellect as less  
 I haven't proven it  
 I had  
 I still have a good memory  
 I think  
 The value I put on them is much less now  
 Most of what I tied to being gifted  
 Compare my current self  
 With my childhood gifted self.

I also feel  
 In my mind  
 I don't feel  
 I have done that  
 I have never had a focus  
 My "giftedness"  
 I am not  
 I do  
 I am always praised  
 I always have felt  
 I SHOULD be doing something better  
 I feel  
 I am too smart  
 Wasting my time  
 I feel  
 Comparing myself  
 I knew.

I think  
 I use my giftedness  
 My role  
 I try to give  
 I can  
 I have always tried  
 Being gifted makes me  
 I really feel torn  
 I want  
 I was (am)  
 I definitely.

I look back now  
 I wish  
 I had felt more proud of myself  
 I think  
 I was lucky in having this gift.

Rachael's I poem elicits two contrasting voices: *a voice of untapped potential* and *a voice of doubt and proof*. While Rachael acknowledges her giftedness in her youth, she is doubtful that it still exists today. She is conflicted about her giftedness and feels pressure to prove to herself and others that it still exists. This conflict arises from the voice of untapped potential. Deep down Rachael still believes she is gifted, but has never

fulfilled her potential. The phrases “I SHOULD be doing something better”, “I am too smart”, and “Wasting my time” support the idea that Rachael did not meet her own expectations of giftedness. There is a sense of, maybe not failure, but of disappointment in herself. I think Rachael had high hopes and expectations for herself, and somehow life got in the way and she was left with a lot of dreams tucked away, never to be examined or pursued.

Rachael’s inability to meet her own standards of what a gifted individual should accomplish brings out the voice of doubt and proof. Rachael teeters back and forth between believing she is gifted and thinking she is not; this is exemplified when she says “I was (am).” Rachael repeatedly compares her self with others and with what she believes to be a standard of giftedness, even going so far as to compare her adult self with her childhood self. This constant comparison to others eats away at her self-confidence and her belief in her own giftedness. She feeds her doubt by judging her own intellect and finding it lacking in comparison to those people who meet the standards she has set. She is still striving to prove herself. Oddly enough, the belief in her ability has not changed. She feels smart and capable of graduate school, but she rejects the idea of still being gifted, even while she searches for proof.

*Sadie*

I knew  
I would  
I knew  
I’d find more people like me  
I was the smart kid  
I was very quiet  
I was very restrained  
I tried very hard to please everyone else  
At my own expense  
I was very introverted

I had such a hard time  
I just couldn't  
I felt so awkward and vulnerable  
I think  
I could never  
I couldn't be  
I was just too inhibited  
I don't know why  
I just couldn't  
Be accepted for being me  
I didn't feel different  
I really was.

I sort of stopped  
I was still  
I just couldn't  
I FELT  
I just never fit  
I didn't fit.

I think about it  
I realize  
I feel  
I think  
I have a burning need to achieve  
I'm proud  
When I was younger  
I expected to achieve  
I needed to achieve  
But I really didn't  
I discovered  
It was very difficult for me.

Being gifted is a huge part of who I am  
It defines who I am  
How I think and act  
What I expect of myself  
I have this incredible need to achieve and succeed  
I'm gifted  
I deserve the label  
I know  
I will never be satisfied  
I often wonder  
If I would have  
I did  
I couldn't imagine a life



Where I wasn't special  
I don't think I'd change that for anything.

Sadie's I poem begins with an exploration of her differences, and from that arises *a voice of exclusion*. No matter how Sadie tried to relate to those around her, she found that her differentness, her uniqueness, her giftedness, kept her from developing the relationships she wanted. Something inherent in Sadie prevented her from connecting with those around her, and this is supported by the phrases "I had such a hard time", "I just couldn't/Be accepted for being me", and "I just never fit." Sadie acknowledges that this has been a challenge she has had to contend with her entire life, and to this day she struggles with relationships. Sadie explains that the give and take of her relationships is unbalanced, and that most people are uncomfortable with the intensity she brings to all aspects of a relationship. While Sadie craves the closeness of relationships, she admits she is equally to blame for the exclusion she feels – it is often easier for her if the distance is maintained so she does not have to twist herself to fit the confines of other people's boundaries in relationships.

The latter half of Sadie's I poem allows for a second voice to come through: *a voice of substantiation*. It is here that Sadie examines her giftedness, and concedes that being gifted defines who she is. Sadie recognizes that proving she is truly gifted is a war waged within herself, but that the battles take shape in the external world; she requires external proof in order to have inner confirmation. Throughout her life Sadie has felt this inner push to recognize her own potential, to reach her potential, and be recognized for her accomplishments. She actively seeks out ways to satisfy this internal drive and accepts that this drive will never be fulfilled. Even though this drive to prove her

giftedness is a constant pressure on Sadie, it is not something she could imagine living without.

These voices are complimentary because they are both aspects of Sadie's personality and highlight her uniqueness. These voices are part of what shapes her giftedness and they play a role in how she perceives and interacts with the world.

### *Tatiana*

I thought  
I suppose it's worthwhile  
I am not trying to deflect any questions  
My personal experience with giftedness  
I believe  
I am viewed by others  
I think it is always worthwhile to understand.

I think  
I think of being smarter than average  
I also think  
I think that giftedness deals with perception and understanding.

It makes me wonder why  
I do agree  
Motivation, high self-concept and creativity  
I frequently would use those words  
Describe myself  
Does that necessarily make me gifted?  
Or does that make me the product of an environment that instilled these values in me?  
I identified with these labels  
I wanted to look a bit further.

Tatiana's I poem elicits two soft voices that compliment each other beautifully: *a voice of awareness* and *a voice of questioning*. Tatiana demonstrates awareness not only of her own giftedness, but also of how she is viewed and understood by others. Tatiana is aware of the importance and value of understanding the perceptions of people around her and how that might impact her own understanding of herself and the world. Tatiana expands the idea of giftedness beyond the intellectual and academic realms, and focuses

on the idea that there is a difference in understanding and perception within the experiences of a gifted individual. It is this difference in experiencing and understanding that separates gifted individuals from smart individuals.

Tatiana's awareness of the role of giftedness in her life enables her to question that giftedness. Tatiana asks: What does it mean to be gifted? What is it about herself that is gifted? Does the giftedness come from within or from without? Tatiana is aware that questions need to be asked, and that understanding her giftedness will require extensive self-examination and exploration.

*Winston*

My mind  
I feel that it has given me some of the confidence needed to succeed  
I am not sure if my success  
Is a result of my giftedness.

I was ahead of my class  
Which I owe in part to my parents  
I was always told  
I was doing very well.

I remember in grade school being proud  
My accomplishments  
I think this is a function of my parents  
I think my efforts were largely to impress them.

I was  
I was identified as gifted  
I was always concerned  
It would alienate me from other students  
I was careful to point out  
I was basically doing it to have time out of class  
I felt  
I could have gotten further  
Had I been challenged to work harder.

I think  
I was expected to complete a university degree  
I feel that because an undergrad degree

Was what I perceived as acceptable  
 I was drawn toward a graduate degree  
 I think being identified as gifted  
 I achieved more than I would have otherwise  
 I am proud of my academic achievements  
 Things may have worked out differently for me  
 Had I not been identified as gifted.

After many listenings of Winston's I poem, two outwardly conflicting, yet actually complimentary voices became evident: *a voice of detachment* and *a voice of inclusion*. While Winston acknowledges and accepts his ability and talents, he maintains a personal distance from the label of giftedness. This distance is supported by the phrases "I was ahead of my class/Which I owe in part to my parents" and "I think this is a function of my parents," and Winston attributes much of his success in his youth to his parents' support and influence. Winston realizes the impact the label of giftedness can have, and understands that it has the potential to push individuals past their original level of achievement – the label is a motivator all on its own. In the last stanza of the I poem, Winston recognizes that his accomplishments may have been supplemented by the opportunities that being gifted can grant an individual, and he states that "I think being identified as gifted/I achieved more than I would have otherwise." Just being gifted is not necessarily enough, it is the label of giftedness and the opportunities associated with the label that helps propel gifted individuals to greater achievement.

Winston uses his personal distance from the label of giftedness to aid him in his search for acceptance and inclusion. The voice of inclusion in his I poem reveals his desire to be seen as a regular person with respect to his peers. The phrases "I was always concerned" and "I was careful to point out" illustrate Winston's awareness of how the label will influence his peers' perception of him, and he works hard to overcome the

stigma of being labeled gifted. Throughout his life, Winston is cognizant of fitting in and being seen in the same light as his peers; he steadfastly rejects the idea of being better than others because of his giftedness, and works to promote that perception of himself. Giftedness is commonly equated with a general superiority (which is not acceptable in society), even though giftedness is often exhibited as a talent in a certain area. Winston is not alone in equating giftedness with being better than other people, and in response he seems to instinctively shy away from being seen as superior in order to maintain a comfortable place among his peers.

### General Overview of the Themes

Using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003), emergent themes were identified from the analysis of interview transcripts and journaling documents and are presented in this section of the chapter under five main headings: Evolution of Giftedness, Success and Failure, Expectations, Effort, and Doubt and Proof. Table 5 provides a matrix of participants and themes. In addition, Table 6 provides a breakdown of the keywords used to develop the themes. A detailed explanation of the process used to derive the themes was presented in Chapter Three.

### Evolution of Giftedness

Participant responses were concerned with changes in the perception about and feelings towards giftedness across the lifespan. The participants examined what giftedness meant to them in childhood, during university, and now. Participants were presented with a more expansive definition of giftedness and their reactions were discussed.

Table 5

*Matrix of Participants and Themes*

Participant	Themes				
	Evolution of Giftedness	Success and Failure	Expectations	Effort	Doubt and Proof
Barry	X	X	X	X	
Chuck	X	X	X	X	X
Kya	X	X	X		
Lance	X	X	X	X	X
Rachael	X	X	X	X	X
Sadie	X	X	X		X
Tatiana	X	X	X	X	X
Winston	X	X	X	X	

Table 6

*Matrix of Collapsing Keywords into Categories*

Participant	Categories				
	Giftedness	Success and Failure	Expectations	Effort	Doubt
Barry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gifted now</li> <li>• Defining giftedness</li> <li>• Re-defining giftedness</li> <li>• Self-perception</li> <li>• Questioning giftedness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success and university</li> <li>• Success personal life</li> <li>• Success now</li> <li>• Success as a given</li> <li>• Standards of success</li> <li>• Failure</li> <li>• Non-academic pursuits</li> <li>• Passion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career path</li> <li>• Direction</li> <li>• Pre-defined path</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effort</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Coasting</li> <li>• Drive in university</li> </ul>	
Chuck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining giftedness</li> <li>• Perception of giftedness</li> <li>• Self-perception</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success</li> <li>• Failure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Direction</li> <li>• Career path</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effort</li> <li>• Perfect</li> <li>• Coasting</li> <li>• Change in effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doubt</li> <li>• Proof</li> </ul>

*(table continues)*

Participant	Categories				
	Giftedness	Success and Failure	Expectations	Effort	Doubt
Kya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defining giftedness</li> <li>Gifted now</li> <li>Perception of giftedness</li> <li>Self-perception</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Success</li> <li>Failure</li> <li>Attribution</li> <li>Perfection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations</li> <li>Pressure</li> <li>Academic goals</li> </ul>		
Lance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceptions of giftedness</li> <li>Intensity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Success</li> <li>Failure</li> <li>Perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations</li> <li>Direction</li> <li>Pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effort</li> <li>Drive</li> <li>Focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proof</li> <li>Confirmation</li> <li>Perception of others</li> </ul>
Rachael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defining giftedness</li> <li>Perception of giftedness</li> <li>Gifted now</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Failure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations</li> <li>Pressure</li> <li>Perfect</li> <li>Parents proud</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effort</li> <li>Perfect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doubt</li> <li>Proof</li> </ul>
Sadie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defining giftedness</li> <li>Perceptions of giftedness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Success</li> <li>Failure</li> <li>Pride</li> <li>Passion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations</li> <li>Identity</li> <li>Perfection</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proof</li> <li>University struggle</li> </ul>

(table continues)



Participant	Categories				
	Giftedness	Success and Failure	Expectations	Effort	Doubt
Tatiana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining giftedness</li> <li>• Perceptions of giftedness</li> <li>• Gifted now</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success</li> <li>• Failure</li> <li>• Coping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Direction</li> <li>• Goals</li> <li>• Pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effort</li> <li>• Drive</li> <li>• Incentive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doubt</li> <li>• Proof</li> </ul>
Winston	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of giftedness</li> <li>• Gifted now</li> <li>• Feelings towards being gifted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Direction</li> <li>• Pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effort</li> <li>• Drive</li> </ul>	

### *Giftedness in Childhood*

All 8 participants, when asked to define giftedness, remarked on the same core ideas: quickness and depth of comprehension and superior academic ability. Tatiana explains, “When I think of giftedness, I think of being smarter than average. There’s just no doubt the quickness, the quality, the understanding, is better than someone who [is not gifted]. I understand concepts better. I understand language better.” Kya agreed and went on to explain that she had been taught that her giftedness meant she was better than other people – better at school and that her marks and test results were indicators of her quickness and talent. Academics just came more easily to her than to her classmates. Barry also learned to view giftedness in these terms, stating, “I always assumed that gifted just means academically things come easier to you. You don’t really have to work as hard as other people do.”

When asked to reflect on their own giftedness at that age, several participants revealed how their concept of giftedness was confined solely within the realm of school and academics. Chuck exemplifies this perspective:

I think the reason I was selected for the gifted program is because I fit quite squarely into the common perception of giftedness, which was good at math, good at science, and I was also good at English, even though I hated the subject. That was the only thing that would get you considered as gifted.

This sentiment was echoed by Rachael, who discussed the idea that marks were the benchmark of success and helped define who was and was not gifted:

I do believe I was a gifted child. Things came easily to me, I had a good memory and I seemed to understand things on a different level than my peers without

much effort on my part, but I think my whole perception of giftedness for myself revolves around marks. Nobody ever judged it based on anything creative or anything other than marks.

All of the participants recall taking some type of test to identify their giftedness and knew that they had very good grades in school, but none of the individuals remember having the process explained to them:

When I was young, I really thought [giftedness] only meant being good at school, cause that's what everyone told me it was. It was ... you do really well in school; you're gifted. It was never explained to me how they decided I was gifted. (Sadie)

Thus, all of the participants reported and agreed on several common traits which defined giftedness, but these qualities were all discussed within the narrow confines of academic ability and school success.

### *Giftedness in University*

While all of the participants agreed that the qualities that had originally defined them as gifted were still exhibited when they reached university, several of the participants discussed how their perception of giftedness seemed to disappear in this new environment:

All through grade school, high school, I was well above average then everybody else, but when you throw me in the engineering/physics program at a fairly respected university, one of the top ones for engineering programs, I'm no longer in that top tier. I'm actually in the average/below average range. Just because of the nature of the program, that's the people that it attracts. So it's not that I didn't

perceive myself as gifted throughout university, just not compared to my peers.

(Barry)

Winston recalls a similar experience, and explains that as he aged, he found himself surrounded by more and more individuals who were at the same level of intelligence. He assumed when he entered graduate school that all of his peers must be gifted, as they had all been academically successful in order to enter the program, and that they were all just as eager to learn as he was. Under these new circumstances, it was hard to see the difference between gifted and nongifted individuals.

Six of the participants mentioned that they struggled in university, and several of them indicated that regardless of marks, they still felt like they were failing to fulfill their gifted potential, and in a few cases, that the label of giftedness was either misplaced or lost. Tatiana explained that during her undergraduate experience, no amount of academic success satisfied her expectations. Whether she was getting 80s or 90s in her classes, Tatiana always felt like she could, and should, have done better. Sadie's recollection of her own expectation in university is akin to Tatiana's experience, and she describes how she felt during her first few months at university:

I got to university and realized quickly that I was not at the top level. My work, my ability, my brains now fit in the average category. That was a mental adjustment for me. After that, I sort of stopped thinking of myself as gifted, *per se*. That label went away. (Sadie)

Rachael also struggled during her undergraduate degree, and as a result mistrusted her success during her time in graduate school:

When I was doing the Master's, I mean I got good grades, but it just never felt the same. It never felt genuine. I think because I did not do as well in university in my undergrad, I felt like the giftedness must have been wrong. It must have been a misdiagnosis. It must have been an error somewhere along the line, cause I couldn't really have been [gifted] if I disappointed in university.

Thus, university was a major transition for many participants, where their original view of themselves as gifted was challenged by their experiences, even to the point where the individual doubted the label of giftedness.

### *Giftedness Now*

Once out in the workforce, 7 of the 8 participants no longer identified as gifted – they no longer saw themselves as different from their peers:

When you're in public school, in high school or whatever, the pool of kids that you're in, it's a random sampling, right. So maybe compared to those people I would be considered gifted, but when you're in a certain field of a career that demands certain things, odds are you're surrounded by gifted people. All of my peers, we're all like that, we're all quick learners. We're all smart kids, so in that context, I wouldn't say I'm gifted. No. (Barry)

Kya states that she does not see a difference between how her friends and coworkers operate in the workplace and how she approaches her career; she feels as though they all handle things in a similar fashion, and that she is in no way better than any of them. Since Kya's original definition of giftedness equates giftedness with being better than others, it is not surprising that when put in an environment where she does not feel she is better than others that she loses her sense of giftedness.

When asked to reflect on their giftedness and why it no longer seemed to be a part of them, several participants pointed out that they no longer had a benchmark for success to measure themselves against; participants stated that grades were how they had previously measured their success and giftedness. Rachael explains:

Most of what I (and teachers, parents, friends) tied to being gifted was directly related to having good grades. Without having to obtain good grades now, there is no benchmark on which to compare my current self with my childhood gifted self.

Rachael felt that if she really were a gifted individual, then she would have accomplished greater and more notable achievements in her career. Since she had not measured up to her expectations of how a gifted adult should be successful, then she was not gifted after all – somehow that giftedness disappeared over time.

While Chuck also measured his giftedness with grades, he now questioned if he was ever truly gifted. The talents and abilities that he saw as part of his giftedness in his youth still existed, but did they really amount to being gifted? Chuck elaborates:

Those [gifted] qualities are still true, but they don't seem to amount to much in my adult life, in my career. And so, maybe I never lost my giftedness, but maybe my giftedness never really was that much to begin with. I had a good memory and I was good at math, you know, I mean that's good. And it was good enough to get me good marks in school, but perhaps that's all I had. So although I still have those skills, they're not enough to make me stand head and shoulders above everybody else.

Interestingly, several participants referred to themselves as still gifted at a later point in the interview, but they pointed out that their giftedness had changed, or decreased, over the years. “I think of myself as gifted, but I don’t think of myself as extraordinarily gifted or highly gifted anymore,” explains Tatiana. Like Tatiana, Sadie sensed a change in her giftedness, but she also became more aware of the difference between herself and other gifted individuals:

I don’t think I’m as gifted as I originally thought I was. I’m not exceptionally gifted, more on the mild to moderate side. You know, it’s not mind-blowingly brilliant. It’s just a little bit special. And there’s that continuum that I didn’t realize existed when I was young. I didn’t realize there was a difference between gifted people. I thought we were gifted and that was all there was to it. I didn’t realize there was such a large spectrum.

Thus, most participants set aside their gifted identity when they joined the workforce, no longer seeing the difference that had originally separated them from their peers. Participants felt that they were substantially less gifted than they had thought themselves to be when they were in elementary and secondary school, and some even doubted they were ever truly gifted at all.

#### *A Broader Definition of Giftedness*

At the end of the interviews, the participants were introduced to the notion that giftedness was more than just superior intellect and academic ability, but that there were emotional and social dimensions to giftedness. Several participants reacted as if this idea was a revelation, including Sadie, who stated, “No one ever suggested there were other aspects to giftedness. No one had ever told me that. I didn’t realize that there was more to

being gifted than just marks.” Barry was also intrigued with the idea that there was more to giftedness than intellectual ability. The notion of social and emotional dimensions of giftedness resonated with him in a way that the purely intellectual definition of giftedness never did:

When thinking about giftedness previously, I simply assumed that it only applied to academic achievement, which is maybe why I was prone to dismiss and not embrace it - I think it's safe to draw the conclusion that I downplay my giftedness, and that's simply because I never really gave the label much merit.

When asked to reflect on giftedness within this broader, more dynamic definition, most of the participants were quick to identify traits that embodied this new perspective on giftedness. Two participants, Rachael and Tatiana, mentioned that their minds seemed to be in constant motion. Rachael explains, “I never stop thinking. My brain’s constantly going, constantly going. It never stops till I sleep.”

Six of the participants recognized an intensity about themselves that could be attributed to their giftedness. Lance clarifies, “My interests seemed more intense than some other people. I mean I tend to go all out with them. There’s almost a kind of manic intensity to my endeavours and interests.” Kya also felt that she approached life with an unusual amount of intensity that was almost beyond her control, stating, “If there’s something I feel is interesting or important, it’s almost like I have to go full force into it. It’s not halfway. There’s no halfway, it’s always full in.”

Half of the participants identified with the emotional dimension of giftedness, and 1 participant described how her emotional intensity influenced her interactions with others:



I think my emotionality seriously characterizes me as gifted. It's something I always struggled with because I feel so much more deeply than I think everybody else does. I make connections and relationships, at least from my side, which are much stronger, much deeper, much needier than other people. I get so hurt because there's no reciprocation. What I give to them, they don't really need. When I want that back, they don't have that to give. I find that really tough.

(Sadie)

Thus, most participants embraced the idea of a more expansive definition of giftedness, and many recognized an intensity in themselves that characterized the social and emotional sides of giftedness. While the participants acknowledged these other dimensions of giftedness, they were reticent to talk in depth about how they felt.

### *Questioning Giftedness*

Several participants questioned more than their own giftedness, but giftedness as a larger concept. One participant wondered how being labeled as gifted influenced his achievements:

I am not sure if my success in educational endeavours is more a result of my giftedness, or the mindset of being a gifted individual. I think being identified as gifted has allowed me to perhaps achieve more than I would have otherwise.

(Winston)

Another participant examined some of the qualities that make her gifted:

Motivation, high self-concept and creativity – they are interesting words and are words that I frequently would use to describe myself. But does that necessarily

make me gifted? Or does that make me the product of an environment that instilled these values in me? (Tatiana)

And another participant, Barry, questioned the deeper meaning behind being gifted, when he asked, “In the grand scheme of things, how important is it that I’m gifted? What makes me so special?”

Thus, several participants wondered how being labeled affected their life, if the traits that they believe qualify them as gifted are truly that special, and if being special really held much meaning after all.

### Success and Failure

Interview responses centered on higher personal success expectations and standards and revealed three aspects of gifted individuals’ perspective on success and failure: success as a given, failure expectations, and feelings about failure.

#### *Standards of Success*

Six of the 8 participants believed that they had higher personal definitions and standards for academic success, and that these definitions differed from their nongifted peers. Barry stated that passing a test or being successful in a course held less value and awe for him than it would for an average student. There is an expectation of success that precludes any satisfaction from just passing. Sadie concurred and went on to explain in detail:

There was the regular 50% pass/fail that everyone was trying to get over, but for me, if I didn’t reach a certain mark that I thought I was capable of, then that was a failure. So even though technically I still passed the course, I might have gotten an 84 and that was fine, and everyone else thought that was good. That wasn’t the

mark that I aimed for, and so that was failure to me. But at the same time it was failure that I understood, that I could control. It was related to the amount of effort I put in and just the way I looked at that course, or that test or whatever.

Chuck echoed the focus on grades and personal standards when he stated:

My expectation was that I would get 90 or above in every subject. I went into every test thinking I was going to get 100%. I didn't always get 100%, but pretty close. I think my standards, the standards I set myself, were much higher than most of my classmates.

The participants established that the understanding of most gifted individuals of what constitutes an acceptable range of marks for them to attain is much higher than the average student's expectation. Kya explains that while it is often easy, particularly in elementary and secondary school, to attain these high marks, there is also concern if marks drop below that acceptable range, even if the individual is still passing the course. Kya states that she often wondered what was wrong with her if her marks dropped into the 80s, if she was closer to being on par with the rest of her peers.

Only 1 participant, who participated in a full-immersion gifted program in grades 5-8, did not focus on grades as a benchmark for success, instead he focused on the intrinsic value of learning:

As far as task success, my definition would largely be if I thought I had been interested by it and had learned something by it, not necessarily by the mark that came out at the end of it, which does differ from some people. (Lance)

Another participant commented on his inability to see the intrinsic value of learning:

At that age, especially in elementary school, I couldn't separate the value of learning from getting a good mark. Like for me, I was only interested in the mark, and everything I did was for the mark and not for any intrinsic value the learning might have. (Chuck)

Several participants commented on the difference between the standards of gifted individuals and their nongifted peers, noting that "[nongifted students] wouldn't aim for that higher level, they'd aim for just good enough." (Tatiana)

Thus, most of the participants felt they had elevated standards of success and that it was expected that they would meet these standards. Falling below these standards, even if the task was still successfully completed, was often unacceptable to the individual and resulted in feelings of self-doubt and failure.

#### *Success as a Given*

Meeting the standards of their nongifted peers was a given for all of the participants, and a failure of that degree was often inconceivable when they were in elementary and secondary school. All of the participants commented on the lack of failure they encountered during their elementary and secondary school years:

For a lot of people that weren't in the gifted program that really had to struggle to get that B-, that was a big success for them. Whereas for me, it would be like whatever, there was no fear of getting anything less than a B-. (Barry)

Chuck found the idea of failing in elementary school quite amusing; he had never dealt with any failure at that point in his life and could not imagine encountering a task or subject that he would not have excelled at. Sadie reiterated this idea saying, "I just never

failed. Never failed ... anything.” To both of them it was an unfathomable thought at that point in their academic careers; they were almost incapable of failure.

In two cases, this idea of success as a given went so far as to devalue their accomplishments, particularly in the later years of their academic careers. Kya states that “I’ve never framed my degree, and I don’t see myself doing so in the future. I never went to my convocation, because I didn’t see earning my degree as a big deal. It was expected of me.” Lance holds a similar perspective, saying:

I didn’t even go to my graduation for my Bachelor’s at university because I considered that an equivalent achievement to walking across a room without falling over. It was just expected that I would do this successfully. So I never had the same sense of “Awesome! I finally got my university diploma,” that some people might.

Thus, the belief that success was a given for these students was perpetuated throughout elementary and secondary school because none of them experienced failure. In a few cases this belief even began to diminish the value of their accomplishments. This expectation of success as a given often set gifted individuals up for a terrible shock when they did encounter failure, which often was not until they reached university. As a counterpoint, several participants discussed the idea of failure expectations, which will be described in the following section.

### *Failure Expectations*

Five of the participants stated that there were areas where failure to some degree was acceptable, and often expected. Generally, acceptable failure was confined to nonacademic areas, although this type of failure was still relative to the personal

standards that were held for academic subjects. For example, both Chuck and Sadie agreed that physical education and music were subject areas where lower success standards were held. They still expected to pass, but they did not expect to attain the same level of marks that they would in academic subjects. Chuck elaborates:

There were certain subjects I knew I wouldn't do well in, like Phys. Ed. If I got a B in Phys. Ed., I was happy. It just wasn't something that I ever expected to be good at. But for me it didn't count, because it wasn't academic. So for me, if it was academic, I should get an A. If it wasn't academic, then it didn't really matter. Then it didn't matter! I mean I would try to get a decent grade so it wouldn't pull down my grade point average too much, but really, I could care less.

Three of the participants voiced considerable disdain for nonacademic subjects, as seen above, but Barry went on to explain that "being gifted in that way caused me to label other pursuits, say interests in arts or humanities, as simply not worth my time."

Thus, many of the participants felt that only academic subjects were of concern when it came to success, and that failure in nonacademic areas was tolerated and even expected. One needs to keep in mind that failure to these individuals was a mark less than their personal standard, but at no time in the elementary or secondary school years were their failures ever true failures.

### *Feelings about Failure*

Many participants expressed some distress when discussing failure, and both Rachael and Kya recalled feelings of physical sickness when they experienced failure - stomachache, sweating, and just generally feeling awful about getting a bad mark. Even

more common among the participants were the feelings of shame that were associated with any type of failure. Kya expressed how failing made her feel:

I just want to crawl away and hide. I felt ashamed because I hadn't completed it, or hadn't been able to do it. I just felt ashamed and embarrassed and didn't want to tell anybody. I wanted to keep it all to myself.

In some cases, failure conjured up very intense feelings and created doubt in the mind of the individual. The consequences of perceived failure, not attaining their personal standard, was potentially damaging to an individual's belief in their giftedness. Rachael relates her experience in university:

I think you feel so much more like a failure when you don't get marks when you're expected to get good marks. When you're told that you're really, really smart, and that you're gifted and you have this high intellect and whatever, and then you get [to university] and the bottom falls out. Emotionally it's very difficult, it's very stressful, and it's upsetting. And you know, for me I thought that [being gifted] was all just a big lie. (Rachael)

When asked about what individuals attribute their failure to, all of the participants indicated that they blamed themselves. Several participants mentioned effort, but it was in the context of them comprehending what was needed to successfully complete a task and understanding how much effort should have been required:

I was just kind of disappointed that I didn't figure it out, in the sense of a test, like studying the wrong things, or an assignment, that I put the effort in the wrong place. I guess I felt like I kind of let myself down, and I never really looked at it as "oh this test was too hard" or "it was the teacher's fault" or something like that.

It was usually on myself, and said, “oh I didn’t do the right things or didn’t read it properly or didn’t spend enough time preparing.” (Winston)

Tatiana had a much stronger reaction when it came to responsibility for her failure. She states, “Failure makes me think oh I’m stupid, I should have known better, I guess I’m just not good enough for that. I didn’t do the right thing, but I should have known better.”

A similar response was given by Kya, who internalized the blame directly on herself:

It was me. It was attributed to either me not working hard enough, or me not putting enough time into it, or enough effort into it. Or attributed to me not thinking as hard as I should have been that day, or if it was a test situation, not putting my full heart into it.

Sadie also placed the blame squarely on herself for any failure she encountered. She explained that it was her fault because she failed to understand what was needed in order to achieve the marks expected of her as a gifted individual – marks she unequivocally expected of herself.

Two participants made a distinction between a failure where personal standards were not met, and a failure where general standards were not met. Lance referred to the latter as an extreme failure, a failure with consequences. When asked to explain what an extreme consequence was, Lance said:

Failing a course, for instance, and having to repeat it, or having to take another course to make up for the difference. That would have consequences, as opposed to getting a D on something, I mean, or an F on a single assignment. That wouldn’t throw me off the way it would throw some people off. Cause I knew I



could recover from that with relatively little effort, so I wouldn't internalize it too much.

Even though the 2 participants' definitions of extreme failure differed slightly, it was apparent that these types of failure had the deepest and most intense impact on their self-concept:

To really, honestly, and truly fail something was so foreign to me and I didn't know how to deal with it. Because all of a sudden there was this big red F in front of me saying, "You're no good." It was monumental in the fact that I suddenly didn't think I was gifted anymore. I didn't think I was bright. I thought, "Oh my god! I really am just average!" and I didn't know how to deal with the idea of being average. Failing that test was a major blow to who I was. I had spent so many years knowing I was gifted, and knowing I was bright and all of a sudden I wasn't. It was as if a piece of me had suddenly been chopped off and thrown away. I wasn't whole anymore. (Sadie)

Lance describes how he internalizes extreme failure:

If it was something I thought I really should succeed at then I might get really upset. Upset as in losing a lot of self-confidence, not mad upset and not necessarily that people can see, but I might internalize it into a very negative centre or extent, or I might be kind of depressed. I might be kind of bummed out at home, and so on. So, you know, kind of forced to confront the reality that maybe I wasn't as good at such and such as I thought I was.

Thus, many participants exhibited signs of stress and discomfort when experiencing any type of academic failure, and the cause of any failure rested solely on

the effort and ability of the individual. In worst-case scenarios, these extreme failures had potentially devastating effects on the self-concept of the individual.

### Expectations

Participant responses revolved around personal academic expectations and the pressures that result from those expectations and the expectations of others around them. In particular, these expectations focused on future aspirations and continued academic pursuit.

#### *Expectations of Self*

All of the participants had high expectations when it came to grades and academic success, as can be seen in the previous section, and that elevated sense of personal expectation carried over into other aspects of academic life. Whether it was how tasks and assignments were completed or how they saw themselves continuing their academic career, many participants voiced how much higher and more involved that expectation was, and how it often pushed them to go further than what others expected of them:

I always felt like I should do better, I have to do better, or see something to completion. It wasn't just seeing something to completion; you had to take it further and do more with it. Make it better than what it was expected. (Kya)

Winston took this expectation even further, and applied it to his entire academic career:

I think that I was expected to complete a university degree; that it was unacceptable to achieve less than this. I feel that because an undergrad degree was what I perceived as acceptable, I was drawn toward a graduate degree as a way of achieving more than what was expected.

Many participants explained that the reason they felt the need to go above and beyond expectations was because they were gifted, and that reasoning was used to explain why they pursued higher education. Tatiana states, “[It’s a] no-brainer, of course you’re going to grad school, you’re gifted, you’re smart.” Chuck also connected giftedness with pursuing higher education, and believed that once he was identified, there was never any question – he would be going on to university. A third participant, Barry, described how the label “just pre-defined what I was going to do,” and he understood that his path into university was a given.

Thus, all of the participants acknowledged that there was a certain expectation for gifted students to exceed expectations, both in the classroom through quality of work and overall marks, and in future aspirations.

### *Perfection*

When asked to reflect on what it felt like trying to meet expectations, 5 out of 8 participants indicated that they felt as though everything they did had to be perfect. Several participants, including Chuck and Rachael, believed that every task or activity they attempted had to be perfect, and if they could not be perfect, it was not worth doing. Tatiana goes on to explain:

My expectations were always to do well. There was never anything that I’d let myself do poorly in. It wasn’t as if “that’s ok, you’ll do better next time.” It was always “you have to do well, you have to do well, you have to do well.” So I definitely think there was a bit of a perfectionist attitude.

One participant illustrated how being perfect was synonymous with being gifted for her:

I felt like I should be, because I was smart, it should be perfect. Because if I was really gifted, then why would it be any less than perfect? So I think that in some weird way I equated perfection with giftedness. (Rachael)

In contrast, another participant explained how being perfect was not a necessary component of giftedness, but being the best was:

I never really wanted to be perfect, but I wanted to be the best. And those two weren't synonymous for me. I didn't have to be perfect, but as long as I was better than everybody else, I was totally okay with that. (Sadie)

Thus, many participants felt that meeting and surpassing expectations was only successfully achieved with perfection. While not all participants thought that perfection was necessary, the idea of being the best was a common goal.

#### *Expectations of Others*

All of the participants recognized that their giftedness created expectations from their parents and teachers. Chuck and Rachael both discussed how their parents' understanding of giftedness presupposed an academic future for them that included, at the bare minimum, a Bachelor's degree. Tatiana explains how her parent's belief in education and giftedness influenced her own perception saying, "My mother's a teacher and homework and education was just something that's done. It's like eating. It's like breathing. It was always 'you're just going to do this and you're going to do well,' and it was never negotiable."

Often these expectations did not take the individual's preferences and interests into consideration:

I really never had much option other than going to university. That was an expected goal from my parents, from myself, from my teachers. I really wanted to go to college, to go to be a graphic designer, and the guidance counselor said to me, “You are absolutely way too smart to be bothering with going to college.” And that was sort of the theme, it was just “You’re too smart to do that. You have to do this.” (Rachael)

In some instances, the preconceptions and expectations of family members and teachers were placed on the shoulders of the gifted individual solely because they were gifted. It was inconceivable to them that the gifted individual would not want to excel and meet the expectations of the family:

My mum was always like “you’re going to university and you’re going to be a doctor.” My teachers were just like “so, which university are you going to?” It was never “are you thinking about university? Are you thinking about...?” It was never what do you want to be, really. It was more like, “so this is what you’re going to do, how are you going to narrow your field?” It was just expected. (Kya)

Expectations for success were not confined to family and teachers, sometimes peers also promoted high expectations for gifted individuals. One participant, who was in a full-time immersion program in elementary school, acknowledged that his peer group created a competitive expectation to succeed and achieve top rank in a room full of gifted individuals:

There was some peer pressure because some of the people were very bright, so having been, in previous grades, always sort of the teacher’s pet and one of the two or three at the top of the class without having to try too hard, now you had all

kinds of people who were often really good at these things whatever the subject might be. So although I didn't have a lot of pressure from the teachers other than living up to what they thought my capabilities should have been, I felt some peer pressure from myself, being moderately competitive. (Lance)

Thus, expectations to succeed, both in class and in the future, were placed upon gifted individuals because they were gifted, and without regard to their personal wants and desires.

### *Pressure*

All of the participants mentioned that there was some pressure that propelled them to exceed expectations and follow paths even if that was not what they wanted; the desire to please others and rise to their expectations was strong and almost overwhelming for some participants at times:

I had to [go to university], it was expected of me. It didn't matter what I really wanted. It was expected of me, and it made it feel like if I didn't do it, I'd be letting everybody down. Be almost like a failure cause I'd be letting people down and not fulfilling my potential. I would say [the pressure] was stifling. It was always that feeling of you should be better; you should be doing more. (Kya)

Several participants felt that these expectations limited the academic avenues that could be pursued. Winston suggested that only certain paths were appropriate to gifted students, asserting "I always felt like there was some pressure to go and get a postsecondary education in a university setting, as opposed to a trade or something like that."

Other participants felt that these expectations have carried through into their working lives and that there is still pressure to exceed their current achievements and do something more:

I've always done education in one form or another. And I've always felt that I have to. I just feel like I should be doing something like that. I always have felt I SHOULD be doing something better. I feel like I am too smart to be wasting my time doing my job. I feel that this comes directly from being labeled gifted and comparing myself to other gifted students. (Rachael)

Thus, all of the participants felt pressured to succeed and exceed expectations, regardless of their own preferences, and that these pressures continue into their lives today.

#### *Academic and Career Direction*

Half of the participants always knew that they would pursue their education to the graduate level, but it was a myriad of factors that pushed them to continue on in higher education, including the expectations of parents, teachers, and themselves. Tatiana states: "My goal was always to get a Master's degree, and I thought quite seriously about getting a PhD."

Interestingly, the other half of the participants decided not to continue on in higher education because they felt they had been directed towards the wrong path, in part because of their giftedness:

To a certain degree, getting that label tends to pigeon hole you and in my case it definitely defined a direction in life. After that point I knew that I had to succeed academically and professionally - there was never any question as to whether or

not I would go to university, and work toward a professional career. In some ways, my giftedness, which was primarily centered on math and sciences, dictated my choice of study and career path. I'm glad I went to university; maybe I regret taking what I took. I felt like I made a mistake going into my program. (Barry)

Chuck revealed that his desire to move away from his predetermined career choices lead to a poor program choice at university. While success was still a goal, the path to reaching that goal became muddled:

The problem was that once I ended up in university and I knew I was studying English Literature, I knew I was doing the wrong thing, but I didn't know what the right thing was. And I didn't stop wanting to succeed, but I didn't know what direction to go in to be successful, cause I really didn't know what I wanted.

Rachael described how her choices in university never satisfied her inner drive or motivated her to succeed in university:

I wasn't in a program I enjoyed. I picked psychology. I enjoyed it in a very broad sense, but when it came to the actual classes a lot of it I just couldn't relate to, I didn't feel any connection to it. I was not passionate about it in any way. So it was just easier to just sort of go through the motions and get it done to please everyone and then be done with it.

Thus, while several of the participants followed through with their aspirations for graduate school, all of the participants had originally set their sights on graduate education. Many participants ended their pursuit for higher education because they realized they were headed in a direction that was not satisfying to them; even though that was often the direction their giftedness implied they should go.



## Effort

Interview responses focused on the quantity of effort expended on academics, and the implications the level of effort had on an individual's work ethic in higher education.

### *Putting in Effort*

Five of the participants discussed the lack of challenge in elementary and secondary school and how that influenced the effort they put into school:

I think the big one was not being challenged. Everything was so easy, all the time.

I never really had to work. I never did homework, I never studied, I never did anything like that. I'd walk out of an exam thinking, "I completely bombed that and I really should have studied," and I'd get a 90. It was like "oh well, why would I work any harder?" And I think that the work ethic was lost in me because I never really had to try that hard in elementary school and in high school.

(Rachael)

Barry reiterated the idea that there was no reason to work hard in school: "When you don't feel like you have to work hard towards something, you never really are going to work hard towards something, if it comes easy to you. I knew that I could get by with minimal effort."

In contrast, 3 of the participants, while acknowledging the lack of challenge they often encountered in elementary and secondary school, still felt driven to put a lot of effort into their schoolwork:

I always tried to get 100% on everything I handed in and I would put in hours and hours and hours to make sure that my work was good enough to get me 100 or as close as I could. (Chuck)

Tatiana commented on approaches she utilized in order to excel, and what motivated her to put in the extra effort:

My ability to go home, or my commitment or dedication to go home, read the assignment, understand the assignment. To read about things outside of the classroom. Put some extra time in if I didn't understand things. I was always inspired to do better because there was always that reward of a good grade and praise at the end of it.

Thus, all of the participants recognized that elementary and secondary school lacked challenge for them, and for many of them not having that challenge resulted in a laissez faire attitude towards hard work. A few participants did put a lot of effort in their schoolwork in order to ensure top marks.

### *Justifying Effort*

Several participants discussed how they were reluctant to put in extra effort because the effort did not justify the reward:

In high school I found that putting in the extra amount of time to do a little bit better, I didn't really bother as much. I mean, I could do just a little bit of work and get fairly decent marks, but the difference between getting those 80s and moving up to a 90 or 95 ... I just didn't put the drive in to get the extra marks. I did care about succeeding, but I'd always sort of gauge it in can I succeed or can I do well enough without having to put in a lot of extra work, so that I have more free time for other things. (Winston)

Lance voiced a similar attitude, but for him, interest dictated effort:

I know I could have been at the top of every class, or near to it, if I had actually put more of an effort in, like some of my peers did. Like a lot of my peers did.

Although I had a capacity for work, it was so entirely self-directed that if I wasn't interested in the topic I would not apply it.

Thus, the willingness of some participants to invest effort in school was related to the rewards they expected or to their interest in the task or subject. In many instances the individual did not see the personal benefit of expending the energy of putting in so much effort.

### *The Cost of Coasting*

All of the participants recalled coasting through some, if not all, of elementary and secondary school. Every one of them expressed regret at not developing a work ethic during their younger years:

I never learned to put my nose to the grindstone the way some people do. Even in university I never really had that shocking moment that some people, that most people reach, most normal people, most sensible people reach, some point in their life where they say, "ok, no more messing around I have to figure out a way to study and a way to do this and that." I never really reached that point and I figure I probably would have been better off if I had, especially if I'd reached that early, at some point in high school. (Lance)

All of the participants felt that they would have been better prepared in university if a work ethic had been cultivated:

The way I coasted through grade school and high school kind of set me up for not

doing terribly well in university. I probably could have done way better in university. Really I think the only thing that limited me in university was my personal drive and work ethic. So I feel like in a lot of ways, coasting and being able to just get by on minimal effort doesn't really help anybody when they really get out to university and even in the working world. (Barry)

Thus, all of the participants realized how important a work ethic is and were disappointed that there had been no encouragement or reason to develop one in elementary and secondary school.

### Doubt and Proof

Participant responses centered on the university years and how that time of struggle created doubt regarding their own giftedness. Participants also discussed the relentless need to prove their giftedness, even outside of the education system.

#### *Proving, Confirming, and Defending Themselves*

Several participants discussed the need to prove their giftedness, and this need started in elementary school, often being tied to marks or praise from others. Tatiana explains how grades were proof and how that made her feel:

Grades were something that were externally determined and always had the same weight. Sort of like an A means an A means an A. All of it means excellent. I guess that to a certain extent they reinforced that I was doing things right, which made me feel happy and made me feel good about myself.

Other participants felt that marks were not the only means of proving their giftedness and that praise and acknowledgement from teachers went a long way in confirming their ability:

I did like to some extent getting praise from teachers and so on. I liked getting positive feedback; it just didn't have to be in the form of a mark. But if they told me they were impressed by such-and-such, I really liked that. I ... maybe it was because I was so repressed from not being allowed to be smart in normal channels, by putting your hand up and answering a question or something in class.

So if someone told you privately, it was something of a relief to hear it. (Lance)

Lance goes on to explain that confirmation of an individual's giftedness can be taken too far and can have detrimental effects: "I've sometimes wondered if this adoring – almost sycophantic! – behaviour from some teachers in the gifted program didn't contribute to my sometimes lackadaisical attitude regarding work and marks. If everyone already thought I was wonderful, what was there to prove?"

One participant discussed her continuous struggle to prove that being different and thinking differently was not necessarily wrong:

Throughout most of my life, I seemed to struggle with convincing other people that I wasn't always wrong. It was important for me to not be "wrong." I didn't have to be right, just to be right, but I felt I had to convince people that my views and my ideas, while different from everyone else's, weren't always wrong. I didn't want people to dismiss my thoughts, feelings, and ideas because they were different. The way I felt or the way I viewed things might be different, but they weren't wrong. (Sadie)

Thus, most of the participants were cognizant of an innate need to prove and defend their differentness and giftedness. In all cases, this need was for external proof

and recognition; participants needed others to see and confirm what they already believed about themselves.

### *Doubt in University*

Six of the participants discussed their struggles in university and how this caused them to doubt their giftedness. Chuck describes how his sudden struggle with academics lead him to disbelieve his giftedness:

I thought I was king of the world when I got to high school in terms of academics. And that lasted for at least the first 3 or 4 years, and then I started to struggle a little bit. I started to lose interest in school, and then when my interest in school faltered, suddenly it became harder to do well, and then I started to doubt my abilities. It was only when I got out of high school that I saw my own fallibility and then I started to doubt whether I was gifted, cause suddenly it didn't seem like I was on top of the world anymore, especially in university.

Rachael explains how her struggles in university caused her to think that her previous good grades must have been mistaken, and that even later success in graduate school could not reestablish her belief in her own giftedness:

When I started my BA it was like those were the real marks. That's how I felt in a way. That was more where I should have been. And high school and elementary school was just this little blip and somebody made some big huge error. So when I got to the Master's program, again I didn't feel like I was ... I worked really hard but maybe I didn't feel like I worked as hard as I should have worked. And so when I got those marks, I thought, "uh oh, maybe they're wrong too."

Thus, several participants faced struggles in university that created a sense of disbelief or doubt that their giftedness still existed, if it had ever been there at all.

*Proving and Doubting Themselves Today*

Several of the participants voiced a continuing desire to subtly prove their giftedness to the world. While none of them were overt about it, there was a general feeling that proof needed to be gathered to reinforce their self-perceptions. Two participants discussed a need to maintain themselves on the same intellectual playing field as their colleagues:

I'm working in an academic culture where everyone around me has PhDs. So I do need to hold up something that says I'm just as smart as you. I guess it's the idea of I don't want anyone to forget. I'm good. I'm damn good at what I do, or I'm damn smart, or I know what I'm saying. (Tatiana)

Rachael goes on to explain how a lack of proof is detrimental to her self-perception of intelligence by stating, "Perhaps because I work with so many people with educational experiences higher than mine (faculty members with PhD's) I judge my intellect as less because I haven't proven it in a graduate studies setting." Chuck echoes that point of view and demonstrates how a continued lack of proof of one's giftedness wears away at an individual's self-concept:

There's no evidence to support [my giftedness]. There's nothing I do, can do or could do in my daily life that would suggest to me or to any onlooker that I was gifted in any way. There's nothing in my professional career that shows any kind of brilliance.

Thus, several participants illustrate how important continued proof of giftedness is to an individual, and that this proof is required at all stages of life. This proof is necessary during the years when giftedness is openly recognized, when an individual's abilities are challenged during university, and it is sought even when individuals enter the workforce.

### Summary of the Chapter

Chapter Four presented the findings of this qualitative research study. The first part of this chapter utilized the I poems developed using Gilligan et al.'s (2003) listening guide method as a means to profile the participants and allow their innermost feelings regarding giftedness to be examined and explored. The contrapuntal voices of the participants emanating from the I poems were almost overwhelmingly negative, including voices of doubt, regret, loss, disconnect, difference, exclusion, and detachment. The adversities that participants' faced while living with the label of giftedness have impacted and shaped their self-perceptions, and this in turn has influenced their academic career. In contrast, the general consensus regarding being gifted was very positive; not a single participant would want to give up being gifted.

The second part of this chapter presented five major themes that emerged from the data including: the evolution of giftedness, success and failure, expectations, effort, and doubt and proof. As children, the participants understood giftedness as being defined by their marks and accomplishments in school. Their understanding of giftedness did not change or evolve as they grew up, and so they were still measuring their adult success, both academic and career, by the standards set in elementary school. The inability of participants to measure up to childhood standards caused many of the participants to



question if the label of giftedness was rightly placed upon them, or if they somehow lost what giftedness they once had.

All of the participants acknowledged that there was a definite pressure for gifted students to meet and exceed expectations, both in the classroom and in future aspirations. These expectations from others often superseded the personal goals and desires of the gifted individual; they were expected to live up to the label of giftedness and society's perception of it. There was pressure from teachers and parents to be successful, and participants expected themselves to achieve success, often with little effort – success was a given. Participants revealed that elementary and secondary school lacked challenge for them, and that lack of challenge resulted in a poor work ethic for many participants. This underdeveloped work ethic did the participants a disservice, as several participants felt ill equipped to meet the challenges of university. The struggles they faced created feelings of shame, self-doubt, and failure, and caused many participants to question the extent or existence of their giftedness. Throughout their life, most of the participants felt a profound need to repeatedly prove their giftedness to themselves and others, via marks or achievements, even if they doubted their own giftedness.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the self-perceptions of 8 gifted adults regarding their own giftedness, how their giftedness changed over time, and how those perceptions influenced their pursuit of graduate education. Chapter One introduced this research study by providing a background of the problem, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the main research questions. This chapter continues with a discussion of the rationale for the study, the theoretical framework, the scope and limitations of the study, and an outline of the remainder of the document.

Chapter Two provided a review of the literature as it relates to giftedness and academic pursuits. Included in this chapter is a discussion of several prominent perspectives on intelligence and giftedness, characteristics of giftedness, a number of factors influencing self-perceptions of giftedness, and the transition from childhood to adult giftedness. Additionally, the theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964) is presented as a unique framework that expands the traditional view of giftedness and supports an exploration of the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness in relation to its intellectual component.

Chapter Three outlined the research methodology and procedures used in this qualitative study. A description and rationale of the research design, the participant selection process, information on the 8 participants, and interviewing process details regarding data collection, recording, and instrumentation are included in Chapter Three. The data collected in this study was analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method as described by Smith and Osborn (2003) and an adaptation of the listening guide method developed by Gilligan et al. (2003). The steps used in both of

these methods are outlined in this chapter. Chapter Three also included a discussion of methodological assumptions, limitations, credibility, ethical considerations, and a restatement of the problem situation.

Chapter Four presented an overview and summary of the findings of this study. The first part of the chapter offers a more personal portrayal of the participants and their lived experiences of giftedness. Participants' first person voices are uncovered through the use of I poems and the themes and contrapuntal voices that surfaced are analyzed. In the second part of this chapter, the major themes that emerged from the interviews and journal entries are discussed under these five major headings: Evolution of Giftedness, Success and Failure, Expectations, Effort, and Doubt and Proof.

Chapter Five begins with a summary of the research study and continues with a discussion of the research findings as they relate to the four main research questions and to the literature presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Five concludes with implications of this study for theory, practice, and further research.

### Discussion

Following is a presentation on how the findings of this study relate to the current understanding and research surrounding giftedness. The four main research questions that guided this study are used to organize and frame the discussion.

*Research Question #1: How have individuals' self-perceptions and understanding of giftedness changed over time?*

Two prominent themes emerged through data analysis that emphasized the perceptions and feelings of the participants surrounding their experiences of and beliefs about being gifted across the lifespan. These themes are the evolution of giftedness and

doubt and proof. While the lived experiences of these individuals differed greatly, it was evident that their perceptions and personal understanding of giftedness represents a fairly homogenous group – a group whose understanding of giftedness was influenced by the perceptions of society.

*Evolution of giftedness.* The definitions that the participants described for giftedness contained considerable similarities, and the remarkable part was that all of the definitions were confined within the walls of the education system, and related solely to the individual's ability to perform and succeed at school. Whitmore (1980) states that there is a general understanding of giftedness as mental or academic superiority and that society assumes that being gifted will result in high achievement in school (see also Tannenbaum, 2003). It is this benchmark of grades and scholastic achievement in the K-12 setting that makes it difficult to recognize and evaluate giftedness as the individual gets older. Many participants recognized that their perception of giftedness changed drastically when they reached university, because the academic status they were accustomed to, their benchmark of being in the top tier of the class, was no longer easily attainable. Once the participants left the education system and entered the workforce, the benchmarks they had previously used for measuring their giftedness, their success, and even their self-worth, disappeared entirely. Little in the research pointed to the loss that the gifted individuals in this study identified.

It is important to recognize how perceptions of giftedness change, and how limiting the childhood definition is. Tolan (1994) explains that as a gifted individual shifts from childhood to adulthood, there is a “change in [society's] criteria from different internal processing to unusual external production” (p. 135). Gifted individuals focus on

areas of talent that will net them the greatest achievement, acknowledgement, and praise; they feel pressured to produce proof of their giftedness as they grow up. This perception limits not only the gifted qualities the children recognize in themselves, but it limits what they think is worth pursuing in their lives.

The narrow definition of giftedness as academic achievement is unfortunately the one perpetuated by society and the education system, mainly because it is the easiest and most reliable way to measure giftedness (Tannenbaum, 2003). While there are theories and scales available to measure intensity and other social and emotional gifted traits (see Piechowski, 2006, 2008; Silverman, 1993), most educators do not have the training or the time to evaluate students on those dimensions, or understand how to deal with those children even if those qualities were acknowledged. The education system, and teachers in particular, need to understand that the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness are just as much a special need as the intellectual ability. Stimulation and support are required for these individuals on many dimensions.

The change in the participants' perception, particularly the fading of their belief in their giftedness, suggests that very little support and understanding is given to these individuals as they grow. It is the slow erosion of confidence in their abilities that appears to be the result of growing up and moving away from the childhood or school-bound definition of giftedness. There is no mechanism in place to support the changing perception and place of giftedness in these individuals' lives. This perspective then begs the question: What are the repercussions of such talented individuals being wasted or lost because they no longer view themselves as special?

*Doubt and proof.* All of the participants mentioned a need to achieve, to succeed, and to exceed expectations, at least to some degree. These findings support the idea that a characteristic of giftedness is an innate desire or need to achieve (Gross, 1998; Tannenbaum, 1983). Lovecky (1986) describes this need as a “particular type of motivation, inner strength, and vital force directing life and growth to become all the self is capable of being” (p. 574). According to Dabrowski’s (1964) theory of positive disintegration, this drive is an integral part of the disintegration process and a catalyst for moving through the levels to self-actualization. Dabrowski might have referred to this drive as disquietude, where “the individual feels responsible for his own development; his sensitivity in regard to this feeling of responsibility (originating from concern that the growth of his personality is insufficient) results in a restlessness about himself” (p. 34). It is this type of internal struggle that Dabrowski requires individuals to experience in order to reach the highest levels of development.

As the participants aged, this strong personal motivation was often riddled by feelings of self-doubt, particularly as their situations became ever more removed from elementary school and their childhood benchmarks of success. McNabb (2003) states: “The aim of justifying the “gifted” label serves as a kind of self-handicapping for many high-ability children and reinforces the feelings of many gifted children that their worth is determined by their performance” (p. 421). In my study, the catalyst for these feelings of self-doubt were academic struggles and failures experienced when the participants reached university; they were not performing to preconceived gifted standards. When their self-doubt overwhelmed them, the participants’ need to achieve often morphed into a need to prove that their giftedness still existed. Voices of loss, doubt and proof,

substantiation, and responsibility in the I poems of several participants emphasized the battles these individuals waged within themselves regarding their self-perceptions of giftedness as they grew up.

*Research Questions #2 and 3: How has being identified as gifted influenced an individual's perceptions of education? How do those perceptions influence their pursuit of graduate education?*

These two questions will be addressed together as they are intertwined and build from one to the other. As described above, participants experienced a marked change in their beliefs and self-perceptions regarding giftedness as they moved through the stages of education. It is, therefore, not surprising that certain aspects of educational life, including success and failure, expectations, and effort, influenced and were influenced by an individual's giftedness.

*Success and failure.* The substantial agreement amongst participants regarding higher personal standards of success and their relatively frequent references to success as a given suggest that these elevated expectations are placed on the individual by more than just parents and teachers, but by the very nature of the label itself. These expectations are perpetuated by the lack of challenge in the classroom (Peterson, 2001) and the subsequent ease with which gifted individuals tend to achieve these high marks. There is also an emphasis on valuing marks above learning, and on using marks as the sole benchmark of success (McHugh, 2006). Do these expectations set up gifted individuals for greater, or more harmful, failures in the future? This question relates to attribution.

Attribution theory research raises a few questions that require closer examination in regarding how failure is perceived in gifted students. Who defines when a task is a

success or a failure? Is the task important or meaningfully relevant to the students in relation to their school success? What is the degree of failure? Any of these questions could impact how an individual perceives success or failure.

The participants in my study did attribute failure to effort, which falls in line with previous attribution research (see Assouline et al., 2006; Bogie & Buckhalt, 1987; McNabb, 2003; Weiner, 1972), but participants revealed that there is a deeper, more cognitive piece to effort that the theory overlooks. It is not just that individuals did not put in enough effort; it is that they misunderstood the amount and focus of the effort required. This is highlighted in 1 participant's quote where she repeatedly says, "I should have known better." This demonstrates that gifted individuals hold a personal expectation of comprehension that goes hand in hand with the effort required for the task. Gifted individuals believe that because they are gifted they must inherently understand what is expected of them in terms of content, comprehension, and the application of effort.

When failure became more extreme and had greater consequences, participants began to attribute failure to a lack of ability. This finding is particularly interesting when looked at in light of the questions of personal relevance and degree of failure I raised earlier. For example, Assouline et al.'s (2006) study does not focus on academic areas that the participants are immersed and invested in, whereas Nokelainen et al.'s (2007) study involves participants who have a vested interest and passion for mathematics. The successes and failures of the highly mathematically gifted individuals impact how they fair in national and international mathematics competitions and in turn likely influence their self-concept. In my study, the impact on self-concept was exemplified by one participant's sudden and irrevocable disbelief in her own giftedness, where a crushing



amount of self-doubt resulted from an extreme failure in a subject she was confident in and valued. Research in attribution theory often utilizes tasks that are removed from the everyday lives of the individuals participating and results are gathered that fail to incorporate the personal relevance of the task into the methodology (see Bogie & Buckholt, 1987; Cook, 1970, as cited in Weiner, 1972). Perhaps personal relevance has a greater impact on attribution than previously recognized.

All of the participants mentioned that they never encountered substantial failure until university. In elementary and secondary school they may have failed, as in not met their personal standards, but it was not a true failure. In university, the discrepancy between their personal standards and the mark received was often great enough to throw them into a state of shock and self-doubt; they were experiencing real failure. It is interesting to note that equivalent failures in nonacademic areas engendered distinctly different reactions. So the question is, why do some failures have greater repercussions than others? This question will be best addressed through the implications for theory later in this chapter.

Whether or not participants went on to pursue graduate education was contingent on several factors, but it is clear that how individuals view and internalize failure had a major impact. Even more important were the coping skills available to deal with failure encountered during the individual's undergraduate degree. For some participants, failure and struggle was transformed into a motivating factor; individuals saw it as a challenge. For others, the perception of their own failure was so great and their coping mechanisms for failure so inadequate, that individuals felt that avoiding potential failure and maintaining their gifted identity were more important than persevering and pursuing

graduate education. While much research has been done surrounding underachievement in adolescents (Reis & Renzulli, 2004) and how they can become successful adults (Peterson, 2001), there has been little exploration of high-achieving gifted children and adolescents who become underachieving adults. Tolan (1994) acknowledges that underachieving gifted adults as a group exists, but the concept is not readily recognized.

*Expectations.* A voice of pressure and expectation presented itself loud and clear in one participant's I poem, and emerged as a significant theme amongst all of the participants' transcripts. In this study, all of the participants acknowledged that being gifted created a set of expectations for their academic success and future aspirations. This expectation pushed them to meet and exceed many of the tasks set in front of them. What was interesting was that the line between the individuals' expectations and their family and teachers' expectations was often blurred; the expectations held by parents and teachers were often unconsciously adopted by the gifted students.

As gifted individuals explored and developed a broader range of interests, they experienced some inner conflict between the expectations of others, the expectations they placed on themselves because of the label, and their own wants, desires, and interests. These interests were often set aside or devalued because they failed to fall in line with the expectations of what a gifted individual should do; expectations held by teachers and parents, and subsequently transferred to the expectations of the gifted individual. Several participants commented on how certain avenues of interest, particularly in the arts, were made to seem less desirable or less suitable because they were gifted.

Expectations dictated how tasks and assignments were tackled, what marks were aimed for, and what trajectory an individual's academic career would take. Most of the

time these expectations were explicitly stated by parents and teachers and also by the gifted individuals. It was acknowledged that the goals of a gifted individual were basically set in stone, at least until an individual reached university. All of the participants believed that their path to university was inevitable, and getting an undergraduate degree was the bare minimum for their academic expectations. After that point, the explicitly stated expectations of parents generally switched from academic achievement to career success and happiness, though not in all cases. One participant in particular, Kya, felt that graduate school was explicitly expected of her. She found the pressure of that expectation detrimental to her view of school and her willingness to pursue her education.

*Effort.* The repercussion of a K-12 education with no challenge was seen in the experiences of gifted individuals when they reached university. All of the participants felt that they did not receive sufficient challenge in elementary and secondary school, and as a result their work ethic and study habits suffered dramatically.

There were a few participants who showed a willingness to work hard for the marks they received in elementary and secondary school, but they were typically motivated by the rewards of good marks and praise from teachers and parents. Many participants felt that coasting was acceptable in elementary and secondary school. Why work hard when it comes so easily? Is that not what giftedness means? I was surprised when several participants revealed in the fact that they were able to coast through all of their preuniversity education. I get the impression that in hindsight, they wish it had not been so easy for them. Not being challenged was more detrimental in the long run than most people realized.

When the participants reached university, it was as if they hit a wall. The marks did not come easily, and even when effort was put forth, the results were not nearly as spectacular as before. What happened that ability and effort were no longer enough to get good grades? Kya, Rachael, Lance, Sadie, and Tatiana all agreed that the style of teaching and learning they were accustomed to in elementary and secondary school was very different than what they encountered in university. Before university, these individuals had flourished under a system that required them to demonstrate surface understanding and regurgitation of facts and figures. This type of schooling allowed them to utilize their ability to make immediate connections between information and their ability to memorize quickly and accurately. Information was organized and connected for them and presented in such a way that they were easily able to store it away for later reproduction. Effort was minimal and as a result they were lead to believe that their good grades were solely a result of their innate ability and “smarts.”

Unfortunately, this method of teaching did not prepare these individuals for further studies at the university level. In this new academic setting, some floundered and failed. They had never been taught how to learn in a way that would foster deeper understanding and meaning. So when faced with challenges, some individuals automatically assumed it was an innate flaw in them, a malfunction in their ability. These individuals had no idea that they needed be taught how to learn.

Gifted students go through their educational lives with great pressure on them to perform, but little is done to ensure that they know how to learn. Arseneau and Rodenburg (1998) expand this idea to students in general and state that:

Many are *unable* to show that they understand what they have learned, when asked simple yet searching questions that test their grasp of content. They continue to profess misconceptions of important concepts; their application of their knowledge to new problems is often weak; their skills in working jointly to solve problems are frequently inadequate. (p. 107)

I think that for this reason alone, teaching in schools must begin to transform from just the sharing of information and content, into a practice that actively seeks out the means to share how to learn. Part of learning how to learn is learning how to cope with success and failure. Several participants believe that they would have placed less emphasis on their academic abilities and the need for success if they had been taught to value effort, and perhaps then they would have seen effort as the cause of their successes and failures.

*Research Question #4: How do gifted individuals perceive the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness?*

When presented with a more expansive definition of giftedness based on Dabrowski's (1964) theory of positive disintegration, where intellectual, social, and emotional dimensions were intertwined with ideas about intensity and sensitivity, the majority of the participants embraced the idea and immediately identified aspects of their personality that fit within that definition. The participants seemed eager to relate quirky, odd, or intense personality traits to giftedness, but when asked to explain their feelings towards giftedness, they were extremely reticent to talk. Perhaps the newness of this perspective required more time for individuals to adjust to it, or perhaps communicating about the feelings they have towards their own giftedness is a foreign and uncomfortable

topic. The discussion of giftedness in a personal sense is very much taboo in most of adult society. While it is acceptable to acknowledge being talented in art or sports or business, it is unacceptable to acknowledge that you were identified as superior to your peers intellectually as a child. There is a stigma attached to being gifted that worsens when an individual reaches adulthood and society frowns on openly discussing that label.

I was amazed at how people change when you give them a broader, more emotional definition of giftedness. Participants seemed to be relieved that it is not just about their intellect. I think for some people, like Barry and Kya, it is really the first time anyone has ever addressed their emotions as part of their giftedness. It is as if the individuals had suddenly opened a door and shed light on a piece of themselves; the light bulb goes on and they reach a deeper understanding (and sometimes even a peace) with themselves.

The impact on the participants of a broader perspective of giftedness raises some interesting questions: How would a more well-rounded perspective on giftedness influence their achievements? Would understanding their emotionality and intensity allow gifted individuals to better communicate and relate to their peers? Would having this definition when an individual is first identified as gifted help them as they transition through the many stages of education and then into the workforce?

Although the participants were hesitant about discussing their feelings about being gifted, those feelings became apparent in the I poems. Of all the voices that were heard in the participants' I poems, the voice of difference was the one most closely associated with the innermost emotions of the participants and the relationships they have with others. The voice of difference was corroborated by voices of inclusion, exclusion,

and disconnect. While not all participants had such voices of emotion in their I poems, the perception of difference was evident in all of the transcripts.

Reis and Renzulli (2004) acknowledged that gifted individuals often notice a pronounced difference between themselves and their peers, both intellectually and affectively, and that gifted individuals sometimes struggle with personal relationships. Some participants struggled with making and maintaining friendships, and others put a lot of effort into bridging the perceived social gap between gifted and nongifted peers. The voices of inclusion and exclusion that arose in the I poems illustrate the lengths that individuals will go to to create personal relationships, and how important those relationships are to gifted individuals. Phillips and Lindsay (2006) note the importance of peer relationships and social acceptability to gifted individuals. Gomme (2000, as cited in Phillips & Lindsay) agrees and goes on to suggest that gifted individuals' need to belong to a group and to communicate is equally as critical as the need to develop their abilities. Barry's voice of disconnect demonstrates how pronounced the gap of perception and understanding can be between gifted and nongifted individuals, and how that influences an individual's ability to develop close relationships.

When the participants developed relationships with other gifted individuals, they revealed that there was an easiness to the relationship that had never been present before. This finding is corroborated by Reis and Renzulli (2004), who claim that when gifted individuals connect with intellectual peers, either through special programs or similar interests, they are more comfortable and feel less pressure to conform in order to maintain the friendships. Kya described this change in comfort levels when she

encountered intellectual peers in university and she referred to these people as kindred spirits; her innate difference was no longer a factor in the relationships.

### Implications

This study provided a glimpse into the lived experiences of gifted individuals and their perceptions of giftedness and its influence on their pursuit of academia. It highlighted aspects of living with giftedness that have received little, if any, attention in the gifted literature. While there is discussion from this study about gifted individuals' perceptions of giftedness across the lifespan, the prevalent themes relate to pressures, expectations, and failures gifted individuals have encountered and the subsequent impact and implications at the university level.

### *Implications for Theory*

Four potential contributions to theory were made as a result of this research. First, it corroborates gifted individuals' innate need to achieve as a characteristic of giftedness. Lovecky (1986), Renzulli (2002), and Tannenbaum (1983) all recognize a drive in gifted individuals to realize the most of their potential.

Second, the findings of the present study refute a facet of attribution theory, and contend that the personal relevance of a task influences an individual's attribution of success and failure. Findings show that gifted individuals identify a difference between the common or standard definition of success/failure and their own personal definition of success/failure, and that the influence of that difference on self-concept is contingent on the personal relevance of the task. I call this the degree of failure. In other words, how closely the task is tied to the individual's self-concept influences the perceived degree of failure. This idea is demonstrated through a degree of failure formula, where the degree



of failure equals the difference between an individual's personal standard of success (pS) and the mark received (m), multiplied by the value of the subject area or task (V).

$$\text{Degree of failure} = (pS - m) \times V$$

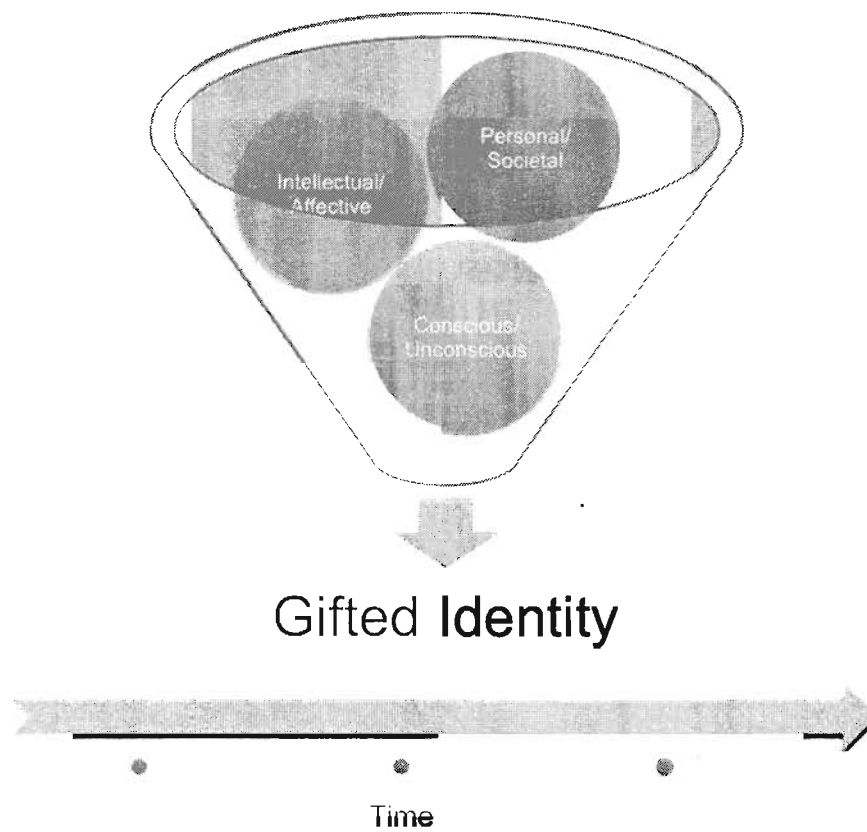
To illustrate, let us assume that the personal standard of an individual for a physical education class is 80, and the student received a 75. The difference is 5, and the value assigned to the class by the student is a 4 (assume an arbitrary scale of 1-10 for value here, just for demonstration purposes). Now look at a math class for the same individual. The personal standard is 90, the student received a mark of 85, and again the difference is 5, but the value of this class is a 9, which substantially increases the degree of failure. This failure is much more meaningful to the individual, and could potentially have a greater impact on the self-perceptions of the individual, which can influence academic achievement, motivation, and behaviour in the classroom. If you look at severe differences in personal standard and mark received (true failures according to general standards of success/failure), or if too much emphasis or importance is placed on a certain subject or task, then you can begin to imagine how large the degree of failure can become, and how devastating such failures are to an individual and his/her self-perception.

Third, it extends the literature surrounding perceptions of gifted individuals as it relates to education. In particular it highlights the differences in perception and expectations that gifted individuals hold about themselves compared to their nongifted peers. Many researchers (Gross, 1998; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2006; Tolan, 1994; Whitmore, 1980) acknowledge a difference in perception

and understanding between these two groups, though none of them directly explore how that difference impacts educational perceptions.

Fourth, the findings suggest a need for a more fluid and flexible view of gifted identity. Figure 1 presents a dynamic model of gifted identity and the dimensions of influence that enable it to change and evolve over the lifespan. The first dimension is Personal/Societal, which contains society's definition of and criteria for giftedness and an individual's personal understanding of giftedness and their experience of living as a gifted individual. The second is Intellectual/Affective, which incorporates the understanding of giftedness with different aspects, such as purely intellectual, purely emotional, purely creative, or a combination thereof. The third dimension is Conscious/Unconscious, which is a continuum of what an individual does and does not recognize in themselves as gifted, and how much or how little giftedness plays a role in their life. The model uses a funnel to illustrate how all three dimensions overlap and combine in order to formulate an individual's gifted identity. An arrow depicting time is included to show that as an individual moves through life, the dimensions of influence shift and therefore alter an individual's gifted identity and their self-perception of giftedness.

For example, my personal understanding of giftedness currently shapes my own gifted identity and I criticize the limitations society's understanding of giftedness imposes on an individual. I embrace both intellectual and emotional aspects of giftedness and believe that both components are necessary in order to differentiate between giftedness and high intelligence. I am extremely conscious of how my giftedness shapes almost all aspects of my life and how aware I am of that influence. In contrast, when I



*Figure 1.* Dimensions of influence on a dynamic model of gifted identity.

was a child, my identity was confined by the societal definition of giftedness as purely intellectual, and yet I was unconsciously aware of an emotional side.

I would argue that participating in this study provided an opportunity for the participants to reevaluate and readjust their own gifted identity. Participants were introduced to a broader definition of giftedness as intellectual, emotional and social, and that would influence their own gifted identity even if they don't embrace the new definition. Just by talking about their beliefs and experiences they are moving from an unconscious to a more conscious understanding of giftedness.

### *Implications for Practice*

Given that gifted individuals acknowledge the one dimensional view of giftedness as intellectual and that little attention has been paid to these individuals as social and emotional beings, not only from the general population but from their own subgroup, we, as educators, need to address the problem in the classroom. Gifted individuals should be recognized for being people first and gifted second, which means that the emotional, social, and intellectual aspects of the individual need to be fostered as a whole, instead of focusing primarily on their academic accomplishments. In other words, nonacademic talents and interests should be valued as highly as academic pursuits, and social and emotional experiences should be recognized and acknowledged for their depth and uniqueness.

Reis and Renzulli (2004) advocate both direct counseling and preventative strategies, including conflict resolution, stress management, and decision making, as effective approaches for supporting the social and emotional development of gifted individuals. Reis and Renzulli suggest that reading or watching stories about other gifted

individuals may be a worthwhile means of self-help for gifted students struggling to understand who and what they are. It may also be worth explaining to gifted students that they are not all the same; they have different talents and different degrees of giftedness. The very act of discussing what giftedness means and what it encompasses can aid individuals in acknowledging the nature of giftedness within themselves as well as coming to terms with how their giftedness shifts with age.

Considering the impact that failure had on the self-perceptions of the participants in this study, it is appropriate to suggest that this issue needs to be addressed in the classroom. In order to counteract the impact of failure, particularly extreme failure, several participants indicated that they wish they had learned how to fail and how to cope with failure when they were young. These participants believe they never had the proper perspective on failure; they were taught that failure was unacceptable. Many gifted students are taught to place themselves on pedestals; being gifted means that success should be effortless and failure never happens (Assouline et al., 2006; McNabb, 2003). Yet, underneath that effortless facade are undercurrents of tension and a fear of being revealed as a fraud. Failure could create doubt about their giftedness, and influence their self-perception. The participants in this study think that accepting and understanding failure, and seeing failure as a learning tool, are critical skills that desperately need to be taught to gifted individuals.

For educators at all levels, but predominantly during the younger grades, this means that opportunities for failure need to be carefully crafted and presented to gifted students, particularly those in part-time gifted programs who are accustomed to always being in the top tier of students in their regular classrooms. These opportunities must

provide students with safe, supportive environments in which to fail, and offer realistic coping strategies that focus on bolstering self-confidence, self-perception, and self-worth, instead of concentrating on techniques that aid in academic achievement. These coping skills must be learned well before leaving the K-12 system, where supportive environments can be cultivated and an intrinsic value for learning can be fostered. Shifting the focus of gifted students from attaining marks to valuing learning for the sake of learning may be one of the keys to helping them maintain a healthy perspective on failure. This perspective needs to be introduced early and integrated into the students' developing sense of self.

Most gifted individuals do not currently encounter substantial failure until university, and at that point, gifted students are often in situations where help and support are unavailable, and failure can have devastating repercussions, both personally and academically. At the tertiary level, appropriate counseling systems need to be implemented to support the academic and personal needs of these struggling gifted students as they enter a new and more challenging phase of their life.

Regardless of what changes are made in elementary and secondary school, I believe the greatest area of need is at the undergraduate level. Six of the 8 participants had terrible, if not traumatic, academic experiences during their undergraduate years at university. In contrast, this period of time was often the best years socially for these individuals; they connected with like-minded peers with whom they could think, feel, and communicate on the same level. It was this period of flux and personal discovery that also held the most angst and self-doubt, and often lead to a sense of disillusionment about school. These gifted individuals never lost their love of learning, but they lost their sense

of giftedness and their love of school. If the education system is to promote opportunities for gifted students to reach and exceed their potential, then the system must be willing and capable of supporting such students through one of the most difficult transitions of their lives.

It is interesting to note that many of the participants felt a sense of relief and camaraderie while discussing their gifted experiences during these interviews. The ability to discuss and relate to like-minded peers is rarely provided for gifted students in a noncompetitive environment. Many of the participants discussed encounters with other gifted individuals during their elementary and secondary school years, and it was always within a competitive context – at an interschool math competition or informally comparing grades after a test. It was not until the participants reached university that they encountered gifted peers in a more social and collegial setting. Even more interesting was that most of the time the individuals were unaware that they were interacting with other identified gifted individuals. The taboo nature of adult giftedness prevented them from sharing their stories; it is not acceptable to talk about being gifted at that age. There is a sense of aloneness and isolation that results from being labeled as gifted. The societal taboo compounded with the innate difference from being gifted can be truly isolating. Feedback from this study indicates that gifted individuals found a lot of comfort in knowing that there are other people out there that have similar feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Several participants revealed how liberating the experience of sharing their stories was for them, and this suggests that providing social and more collaborative interactions for groups of gifted students may be beneficial in helping them adjust and cope with

being identified as gifted. This type of interaction would promote not just the sharing of experiences and feelings, but also encourage a noncompetitive perspective on school and learning.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

The findings of this study have prompted several implications for further research that could be addressed to gain a deeper understanding of giftedness, its impact at different levels of education, and across the lifespan. These implications include the following:

- More explicit use of the theory of positive disintegration and the concept of overexcitabilities to explore the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness in adolescents and adults.
- Exploring the internal and external factors that influence the emergence of self-doubt in gifted individuals.
- Conducting longitudinal studies that explore the perceptions of gifted individuals and their educational experiences over the course of several different educational transition periods, from elementary school to secondary school to university.
- Further exploration of current failure coping strategies used by gifted individuals at the university level and how those strategies could be made available to the larger gifted community.
- Exploratory research surrounding the unrecognized phenomenon of high-achieving children who become underachieving gifted adults.



## Conclusion

This study examined the self-perceptions of gifted individuals as revealed through retrospective interviews. This study has served to inform the existing literature surrounding giftedness especially as it relates to gifted individuals across the lifespan and their experiences and perceptions of education at all levels. This study also provides insight into the emotional impact being labeled as gifted has on an individual's self-concept and academic identity. Specifically, this study illuminated the lack of evolution that an individual's understanding and perception of giftedness undergoes across the lifespan, and the impact such a static and school-bound understanding has on gifted adults' self-concept. It also revealed the influence that gifted individuals' innate need to achieve has on their academic aspirations and their perceptions of themselves as gifted. Furthermore, it revealed how important the understanding and internalization of failure can be on the self-concept of gifted individuals, and that this issue needs immediate attention at all levels of the education system.

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## Appendix A

## Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter



Office of Research Services  
Research Ethics Office  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1  
T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

[www.brocku.ca](http://www.brocku.ca)

DATE: November 14, 2008

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Dr. Alice Schutz, Education  
Adrienne Sauder

FILE: 08-135 SCHUTZ/SAUDER  
Masters Thesis/Project

TITLE: Exploring Gifted Adults' Perception of Giftedness in their Pursuit of Graduate Education

*Michelle K. McGinn*

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION: ACCEPTED WITH NOTES**

- You may wish to consider an alternative location to conduct the research other than your home or participants' home to provide a neutral and safe location for discussions.
- You mentioned that during and after the interviews you will record observational notes of your participants. You may want to consider explaining this in your introductory script.
- The email address in the invitation letter is not the same one you wrote on the poster. Please use one email account. Your Brock email may be preferable.
- Please review participant materials for consistency in voice and other proofreading issues.
- You indicate that you will recruit at a mid size university in Southern Ontario. If this includes universities other than Brock, please make sure that you have permission first, which may involve obtaining ethics clearance from the institution.
- You may wish to provide resources beyond the noted book or family doctor (e.g., websites, gifted organizations).
- You indicate that you intend to turn on the voice recorder before asking participants if they have any questions or concerns about the research. It may not be appropriate to record any comments at that point, so please revise your approach.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of **November 14, 2008 to June 30, 2009** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form *Continuing Review/Final Report* is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/an

## Appendix B

### First Interview Guide and Script

The first voice recorded interview takes approximately 60-90 minutes. Before the interview begins, the participant is asked to choose the pseudonym that will be used to protect their identity during the data collection process. The interview will begin with an explanation about how the interview will proceed and a reminder to the participant of the purpose of the study and the research questions being addressed. The principal researcher used the following introductory script with each interviewee.

(Turn on voice recorder.)

This voice recording is of (insert pseudonym) on dd/mm/yyyy. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. This interview will be recorded and will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

This research study is part of the requirements for my Master of Education at Brock University, and I am writing a thesis about gifted adults' perception of giftedness and how those perceptions have influenced their pursuit of graduate education. Studies such as this one are important in further understanding the affective nature of giftedness and its influence in the lives of gifted individuals. By exploring the self-perceptions that influence gifted learners' decisions to pursue graduate education, educators and gifted individuals alike can identify potential strategies that can be developed to support and encourage this educational pursuit.

I am going to ask you questions designed to encourage you to speak freely and openly about your experiences and perceptions as a gifted individual. During this interview you do not have to answer any question that you feel is invasive, inappropriate, or offensive, and if you wish to stop at any point, please let me know and I will turn off

the voice recorder. You have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage without penalty. Your real name will not be used during the recording of this interview and only the pseudonym that you chose prior to this interview will be used to identify you. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

*Interview Script*

1. Describe what it was like growing up identified as gifted.
  - When were you identified?
  - How did you feel about being identified?
2. Tell me about any special types of activities you participated in as a gifted student.
3. What areas did you feel you were most gifted in?
4. What attributes or personality traits do you think characterized you as gifted in elementary school? In high school?
5. Tell me about some of the biggest challenges, obstacles, or frustrations you faced in school.
6. Tell me about your personal academic expectations.
7. Do you think your view of success and failure differed from your nongifted peers? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. Describe how you felt (a) when you succeeded at a task, (b) when you failed a task.
9. Do you still think of yourself as gifted? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. Is being gifted important to you?
11. How have others' perceptions of you as gifted or talented impacted your self-perception of your giftedness?
12. Tell me about the attributes that you think characterize you as gifted now.

13. Tell me how being identified as gifted has impacted your pursuit of graduate education?
14. What aspects of your giftedness do you think could have been supported in order to encourage you to pursue graduate education?
15. How have others' perceptions of you as gifted or talented impacted your pursuit of graduate education?

Possible probe questions may include:

1. Could you tell me more about ...
2. Can you explain that in a more detailed way so I can understand your viewpoint better?
3. Have you any other thoughts about giftedness that I haven't asked you about that you think might be important?

Closing Script:

I would like to thank you for your participation today in this interview. Your insights and experiences as a gifted individual will help me better understand the issues that face gifted adults in their pursuit of graduate education. Do you have any further questions before we turn off the voice recorder and move on to the journaling task?

## Appendix C

### Journaling Task

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study about gifted adults and their perception of giftedness and graduate education. This component of the data collection involves a journaling task that you can take home and do at your leisure over the next two weeks. Once again, I will remind you that your name will not appear on the document. Please use the pseudonym you selected earlier instead.

For this task, I would appreciate your taking the time to document some of your personal experiences about growing up gifted, and take the next two weeks to reflect on what we discussed in the interview. If any thoughts or insights emerge, I encourage you to write them down and explore them. For example, tell me about educational experiences you've had as a child, an adolescent, or an adult. Tell me about how you feel as a gifted individual, and what makes you gifted. Tell me about how being gifted affects how you experience life. Tell me about successes, failures and stumbling blocks you've encountered. Please feel free to use any method (words, pictures, graphs, tables, poetry) to share your thoughts and feelings.

If you have any questions about this task, please do not hesitate to ask. Please hand in this document at the beginning of the next interview session. Before you give me your document, I would like you to read it over and black out any names of persons or places that you feel should be protected by being anonymous. The only people who will have access to read this document are my faculty advisor, Dr. Schutz, and I.

## Appendix D

### Second Interview Guide and Script

The second voice recorded interview takes approximately 60 minutes. The interview begins with an explanation of how the interview will proceed and a quick review of the purpose of the study and the problem being addressed. The questions in this interview evolve from the initial data analysis of the first interview. The principal researcher used the following opening script with each interviewee, and then used the tailored questions to investigate the participant's thoughts more thoroughly. Though the exact wording cannot be predicted, below are some examples of what questions during the second interview may look like.

(Turn on voice recorder.)

This voice recording is of (insert pseudonym) on dd/mm/yyyy. Thank you for your continuing participation in this study. This interview will be recorded and will last approximately 60 minutes.

As you are aware, my research aims to explore gifted adults' perception of giftedness and how those perceptions have influenced their pursuit of graduate education. Once again, I am going to ask you questions designed to encourage you to speak freely and openly about your experiences and perceptions as a gifted individual. During this interview you do not have to answer any question that you feel is invasive, inappropriate, or offensive, and if you wish to stop at any point, please let me know and I will turn off the voice recorder. You have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage without penalty. Only the pseudonym you chose prior to the first interview will be used to identify you. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

*Interview Script (example)*

1. In the last interview you talked about giftedness as being a curse, could you explain what you mean by that?
2. You mentioned last time that you feel that being gifted has a great impact on your social interactions, could you tell me more about that?
3. Last time you talked about an instance where you failed a test for the first time, could you tell me more about why you thought you failed and how you felt about failing?
4. What suggestions do you have for teachers and schools for supporting gifted individuals?
  - Do you feel that support should be continued into university?
  - How do you see that support being provided at that level of education?

*Closing Script:*

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. I appreciate your openness, your honesty, and your insights. Your participation helps me better understand gifted individuals and allows me the opportunity to present their voice through my research.

Once I have transcribed both interviews, I will be emailing you a copy (or providing a hard copy if you so choose) and asking you to read it over. At that time, you may delete, change or reword any part of the interview from either session, and I'd be happy to accommodate your request. You may either email back any notes you make about the transcript, or we can meet in person to discuss any changes you feel are necessary.

Once again, I wholeheartedly thank you for your time and participation.